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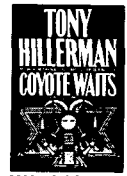

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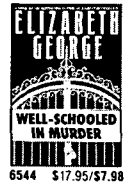

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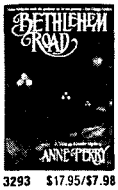

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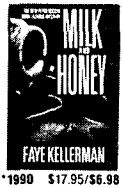

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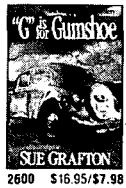

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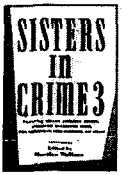

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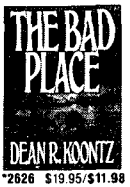

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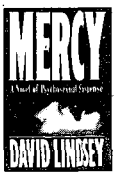

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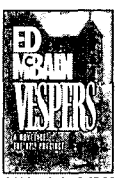

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick and Gloria stood at the railing looking down at the party on the deck below. Suddenly she tugged on his sleeve. "What's that?"

Her attention had been attracted by a slim man with dark hair and a moustache who had appeared suddenly on the stage in front of the audience. He took two or three steps forward and then collapsed. There was a knife buried deep in the center of his back. A few people in the crowd screamed when they saw him.

"Get the ship's doctor!" someone shouted.

Mystery authors Edward D. Hoch and Bill Crenshaw and their wives were the special guests on Davis Publications' Second Annual Mystery Cruise aboard Holland America Cruise Line's luxury liner, M.S. Noordam, *in February. They pronounced the mystery week at sea fantastic, superb, and perfect. And since it provided Mr. Hoch with the setting for this story as well, we get to share in the fun . . .*

THE THEFT OF THE BINGO CARD

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Some of the most pleasant hours of Nick Velvet's life had been spent sailing with Gloria on Long Island Sound, and that was why he finally agreed to her suggestion that they escape the bitter February cold with a week-long cruise in the Caribbean. The giant cruise ships that traveled the southern routes were nothing like the small yacht he guided through the waters of the Sound, but he thought it was the sort of vacation he could be comfortable with.

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"We'll have fun," Gloria said. "And you'll be away from the telephone for once. I won't have to worry about our plans being disrupted by some client wanting you to steal the wig off a mannequin or—"

"That didn't disrupt any of our plans," Nick reminded her. "You're beginning to sound like a wife."

"Don't I have a right, after all these years?"

"We'll go to the Caribbean," he agreed. "I'll leave the travel arrangements to you."

They flew to Fort Lauderdale early on a Saturday morning, leaving behind the snow-dusted expressways of New York and Connecticut. The temperature was seventy-nine when they landed and Nick could feel the warmth begin to thaw out his bones. Their first view of the cruise ship *Antilles* was impressive, and Nick began to understand how someone aboard such a ship could relax and forget the everyday world.

When they were allowed aboard, they found that their luggage had already been delivered to their stateroom. They were on the upper prominade deck, the only one with an outside deck running all the way around the ship. Already, through their stateroom windows, they could see passengers exploring the ship, strolling back and forth as a small band played appropriate music for the sailing.

"How many passengers are on board, Nicky?" Gloria asked as she started to unpack, frowning when she saw his kit of special tools.

"More than twelve hundred, and another five hundred crew members. It's a big ship."

"And we don't know a single one of them. Nothing for you to steal."

"I hope not," Nick said with a laugh. "I didn't come here to meet old friends, Gloria, or to work. Those tools are just force of habit."

The cruise ship had barely left the dock when the loudspeaker blared an announcement that a mandatory lifeboat drill would be held at 5:30 that afternoon. The lifeboat stations were on their deck, and Nick and Gloria helped each other into the bright-orange life jackets that made them bulge incongruously before joining the others at their boat station, number seven.

The boat deck was just above the upper promenade deck, and the oversized lifeboats and ship's tenders hung there on sturdy ropes, waiting to be lowered. Some of the deck stewards called the roll to make certain all passengers were present, then went among them checking and tightening their life jackets. An Englishwoman stand-

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ing next to Nick made a face as the steward reached around her to retie the jacket.

"What a waste of time!" she told Nick. "I doubt if we'll hit an iceberg in the Caribbean."

She was a slender, good-looking woman in her thirties who managed to wear the unflattering life jacket with a certain style. "Is this your first cruise?" Nick asked her.

"My first for pleasure. We came over on the *QE II* once because Herbert hates to fly. This is my husband, Herbert Black. I'm Marnie Black."

"Nick Velvet. Pleased to meet you." The two men shook hands awkwardly. Black was a grim-faced man, obviously resigned to letting his wife do most of the talking. He was a bit older, probably into his mid-forties, with a stocky build. "I do fly now," he clarified with the sort of deep British accent Nick had always admired. "I decided if I was to be ill, five hours was preferable to five days."

"Do you get seasick?"

"Not any more. The medication they have now is truly—"

He was interrupted by a booming voice over the loudspeakers announcing that several of the lifeboats would be lowered to give the passengers an understanding of them. "All lifeboats and tenders are motor-driven, and equipped with signal flares, radios, bottled water, bingo cards—"

At Nick's side, Marnie Black laughed. "Can you imagine bobbing about in the middle of the Atlantic playing bingo?"

"It's probably meant to keep people calm," Gloria suggested.

"Well, I wouldn't stay calm for long in an open boat. At least the tenders are closed in."

The lifeboat drill came to an end and the passengers scattered. A ship's photographer was busily taking pictures of groups in their awkward attire, and Nick was certain the pictures would be on sale soon, along with those taken when they'd boarded the ship. "I hope we don't need to wear those again," he grumbled as he stowed the jackets away in the closet. "What's next on the agenda?"

"We're in the second seating for dinner," Gloria told him. "That's at eight-fifteen. That leaves us plenty of time to look around the ship."

Nick was getting used to the slight vibration of the engines. They'd be at sea for forty-eight hours until the ship docked late Monday afternoon in Puerto Rico. It wasn't the same as cruising on his yacht,

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but he was beginning to like it. He and Gloria went down the hall from their stateroom to a cocktail lounge that overlooked a dance floor and stage on the deck below. A pre-dinner party was in progress for a group of fifty or so men and women, apparently sales representatives for a computer firm. Nick and Gloria stood at the railing for a few moments looking down at the group. Suddenly she tugged on his sleeve. *"What's that?"*

Her attention had been attracted by a slim man with dark hair and a moustache who had appeared suddenly on the stage in front of the audience. He took two or three steps forward and then collapsed. There was a knife buried deep in the center of his back. A few people in the crowd screamed when they saw him. "Get the ship's doctor!" someone shouted, and a man immediately came forward to examine the body.

"He's dead," he announced in a voice that was a little too loud.

Nick began to doubt what he was seeing. "I think it's a game," he told Gloria. "One of these mystery-party things where the guests try to solve a murder."

"But that knife—"

"There's blood all over the back of his shirt, but the stain isn't spreading. It looks more as if it was painted on. Let's go down and see."

They hurried down the stairs to the promenade deck, just in time to intercept the doctor as he was leaving. "Are you really the ship's doctor?" Nick asked.

"Oh, yes—Dr. William Kites from Omaha," the man said with a slight smile.

"And was that a real murder?"

The smile became a chuckle. "No, no. These people are top sales reps from all over the country. They're being rewarded with this cruise, and the company threw in a mystery game for them to solve. It adds to the fun."

"Who's the man with the knife in his back?"

"Well, that depends. To the group he's an industrial spy from a rival company. In actuality, he's a fellow named Simon Franz, one of the dancers in our nightly cabaret."

"You're not going to help solve the mystery?" Nick asked Kites as some husky crewmen carried off the victim.

"No, they just wanted me to examine the corpse and declare him dead. I was glad to do that."

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"We've got an hour before dinner," Nick said. "Would you care to join us for a drink?"

Kites smiled. "I wouldn't mind that."

They found a lounge decorated with a large white statue of King Neptune and ordered cocktails. "Is this a permanent job for you?" Gloria asked the doctor.

"No, I'm on board only for three weeks. That's three round-trip cruises to the islands. Then someone else takes over. It's good duty, though. Most of the time it's simply a vacation, with little call for my services unless the seas get rough."

He was a jovial, friendly man and they spent an enjoyable time with him before dinner. Finally, when the steward's ringing of the chimes signaled them, they went down to the dining room. Their tables weren't far apart and Nick and Gloria were facing the one where the doctor sat with some other ship's officers.

"And there's the couple we met on deck," Gloria said. "The Blacks."

Nick half turned in his chair to see them seated at a large table toward the center of the vast dining room. Their own table was only for four, and the other couple were an older man and woman from Seattle who informed Nick and Gloria they'd been given the trip as a forty-fifth anniversary present from their three children. While Nick was glancing about the room, he saw one of the dinner captains stride quickly to Dr. Kites's side and whisper something to him. Kites was on his feet at once, following the man. "Excuse me," Nick told Gloria, "I'll be right back."

There was no reason to suppose that Dr. Kites's sudden errand concerned him in any way, but Nick had always had an innate curiosity that sometimes got him into trouble. This time it led him to the cramped backstage area away from where he'd seen the men lug the body of the murder-game victim. There he found three or four crew members standing around, looking glum. Nick hesitated, and almost at once Dr. Kites reappeared through a doorway with the ship's officer. The group spoke in low voices and then Kites headed back toward the dining room.

"What happened?" Nick asked, falling in step beside him.

"It's that man, Simon Franz—the one who was the murder victim in the game earlier. He's dead."

"*Dead?* What killed him?"

"I'm not exactly certain. There are needle marks on his arm. It could have been a drug overdose. We'll want to keep this quiet, of course. Please don't tell any of the other passengers . . ."

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Nick wasn't a detective, and the death of Simon Franz meant little to him. When he told Gloria about it later, she speculated about whether one of the mystery-game players had taken the role of murderer seriously.

"Did anyone see Franz alive after they carried him out this afternoon?" she asked.

"Apparently not. If an injection killed him, I suppose it might have been administered while he was being carried out, or later. Or maybe it was an accidental drug overdose. Things like that happen."

"I'd hate to think the crew is high on drugs."

"The crew is mainly Indonesian and Filipino. Franz was a dancer with the troupe hired to do the shows. He had no connection with the crew."

"I don't know," Gloria said as she climbed into bed. "It still makes me uneasy. I don't think I'll sleep a wink."

Nick was surprised at how well they slept, lulled by the gentle movement of the ship. In the morning they took a few turns around the deck before breakfast and spent the rest of the morning relaxing around the pool.

At the buffet lunch, Nick found himself in line behind Marnie Black, who turned to him with a conspiratorial whisper and asked, "Did you hear that someone was killed on the ship last night? One of the performers in the lounge show."

"Really?"

"They say the police will be meeting the ship in San Juan tomorrow."

Word of the death was obviously spreading. As Nick told Gloria about his exchange with Marnie Black, she said, "There's a woman watching you from that table to your left. One of your many admirers, I suppose."

He waited a moment and then casually glanced in that direction. The woman was dark-haired and a bit overweight, with an attractive face. Nick's eye was caught by the glitter of diamonds on her fingers and an expensive-looking bracelet watch on her left wrist. "I have no idea who she is," he told Gloria.

But he was soon to find out. She approached him as they were leaving the dining room and asked, "Aren't you Nick Velvet?"

"Yes, I am."

"You helped a friend of mine once. I wonder if I could speak with you privately."

"I'm—"

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"I want to hire you." She spoke intently, lowering her voice.

"I'm on vacation," he told her, watching Gloria's back as she kept on walking. Down the hall a bit, she stopped to study the photographs of the passengers that had been taken the previous day.

"What's your usual fee?" the woman asked.

"Thirty thousand," Nick told her, raising it by five thousand because he didn't want the job.

"I'll pay you forty." Other people were coming out of the dining room behind them and she was forced to cut their conversation short. "Meet me at the bingo game this afternoon."

She hurried away and Nick walked on to join Gloria. "Have you found our picture?"

"Right here. It's terrible of me."

"No, it isn't. Let's order one."

"Who was your girl friend?"

Nick grinned. "Jealous?"

"I told you she was watching you while we ate. What did she want?"

"To hire me."

"Nicky, we're on vacation!"

"I told her that."

"Good! What are we going to do this afternoon?"

"How about some bingo?" Nick suggested.

On the way to the lounge where the bingo game was held each afternoon, Nick and Gloria encountered Dr. Kites again. Nick took him aside and asked, "Have you determined anything about that death last evening? Rumors are spreading that he was murdered."

Kites looked uncomfortable. "As near as I can tell, death was caused by an overdose of cocaine. Whether self-administered or not, I have no way of knowing."

"I thought cocaine was inhaled."

"Usually it is, but some addicts prefer to inject it." He broke off the conversation and moved away. "Good to see you again, Mr. Velvet."

Nick rejoined Gloria and they continued into the lounge where the bingo game was about to begin. He bought just one card for each of them because he didn't intend to stay long. The cards had slides across each number, which could be moved with the finger as that number was called. "That's neat," Gloria decided, working the slides. "You don't need those old plastic markers."

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"When's the last time you played bingo?" Nick asked her.

"About twenty-five years ago, when I was in high school."

Herbert and Marnie Black were at one of the tables and motioned for Gloria and Nick to join them. The British couple had three cards each and obviously took their bingo seriously. "They have a game called the snowball," Marnie explained enthusiastically. "You win a big prize if you cover all your numbers. If nobody gets it, the prize is added to the following day's jackpot."

Nick covered his free-play square in the center of the card and waited for the first number to be called.

"G-49," a voice called out over the loudspeaker. The game had begun.

Almost at once Nick spotted the dark-haired woman who had accosted him earlier. She was standing near the windows, seemingly more intent on the sea outside than on the bingo game. He excused himself, passing his card to Gloria to play.

"I'm glad you decided to come, Mr. Velvet," the woman said, turning from the window.

"I didn't catch your name earlier."

"Dolores Franz."

Nick frowned. "Wasn't Franz the name—?"

"Simon Franz was my husband, but that needn't concern you. I will pay you forty thousand dollars in cash to steal a bingo card."

Nick let his gaze take in the room. "One of those?"

"Just like those, but it's in one of the lifeboats at the moment."

"Oh? Which one?"

"Sorry, I don't know. As you may have noticed, the bingo cards are numbered in the upper left-hand corner. I want card number 253."

"How do I get in the lifeboats?"

"That's what I'm paying you for. I need the card by Wednesday evening, when we leave St. Thomas."

"I'll need ten thousand as a down payment."

"It will be delivered to your room this evening."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"I certainly am."

From across the lounge came the triumphant cry of *"Bingo!"* There were groans from the other players as a white-haired woman hurried forward with her card to claim the prize. "The word is your husband died from a cocaine overdose," Nick said.

"Simon didn't do drugs. He was murdered."

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"Who by?"

"Someone who wanted to keep him from getting that bingo card."

"What makes it so valuable?"

"Just find it," she said, "and deliver it to me."

That night when he and Gloria returned to their stateroom after dinner, there was a small parcel wrapped in coarse brown paper resting on the bed. Nick carefully opened one end and counted out the ten thousand dollars in fifty-dollar bills.

While Gloria relaxed by the ship's pool, Nick spent part of Monday afternoon strolling the upper promenade deck, trying to come up with a plan for locating the bingo card. There were fourteen lifeboats in all, counting the ship's tenders—larger enclosed craft used to ferry passengers to the dock when shallow waters kept the ship anchored out in the harbor. The lifeboats were secured to mooring posts on the boat deck and were lowered when needed. The only way to gain access would be to lower each of them in turn until they were level with the upper promenade deck and could be boarded. Surely that was an impossibility. Nick was certain an alarm would sound somewhere as soon as the first boat was lowered, and the odds were only one in fourteen that the first boat would be the one he wanted.

"Getting your daily workout?" someone asked.

Nick saw it was the ship's doctor, who'd come up beside him. "I was just looking at the lifeboats, Dr. Kites. Is it true they keep a set of bingo cards on each boat?"

"The ships on this line do. If you have a hundred panicky people in a lifeboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, you need to keep them occupied with something until help arrives. These days, it would likely only be a matter of hours, but lives can be lost in a matter of minutes."

"Still, the idea *is* a bit bizarre."

William Kites lowered his voice. "Here comes Mr. Perkins, the organizer of the murder game."

Perkins was a bright-looking man around fifty, with eyeglasses and a receding hairline. Nick remembered seeing him the previous night during the beginning of the murder game, when Simon Franz had been playing the victim he was soon to become in reality. "Dr. Kites," Perkins said.

"Hello, Mr. Perkins. How's the mystery game going?"

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"Fine, just fine. But I've been hearing stories that the chap who played our victim is really dead. Can that be true?"

"Mr. Franz did pass away, but I can assure you it wasn't related to your game."

"Was he—murdered?"

"No, it seems to have been a natural death. But the authorities in San Juan will perform an autopsy."

"In my brief dealing with him, he was most friendly and cooperative. I'm sorry to hear of his death."

Perkins nodded slightly to Nick and continued on his way around the deck. "What about Franz?" Nick asked the doctor. "Did he have any family on board? A wife, perhaps?"

Kites shot him a questioning glance. "Not that I've heard. He was with a troupe of dancers hired out of Miami."

"Has there been any trouble with drugs aboard ship?"

"No, we have to be very careful of that. When we return to Florida, the Customs agents go over everything. What are you, a detective or something?"

"Hardly," Nick answered with a laugh.

When the ship docked in San Juan later that afternoon, he went ashore with Gloria, taking one of the tour buses with Herbert and Marnie Black. It wound its way through the city and then followed a road up to El Morro Castle, the harbor's brooding guardian they'd seen from the ship. They spent an hour touring the old fortress, posing for pictures by stacks of cannonballs that had once been the city's defense against pirates and invaders.

At one point, as Nick trudged up one of the castle's ramps with Herbert Black, the Englishman asked, "Did you see them removing the coffin as we docked?"

"No—I missed that."

"I didn't point it out to Marnie. She's upset enough already about the rumors we've been hearing."

"What rumors are those?"

"That there's a killer loose on the ship."

The women rejoined them and the conversation shifted abruptly. "Isn't this a fantastic view?" Marnie asked, pointing out toward a string of small islands that were catching the last rays of the setting sun.

"Beautiful," Gloria agreed.

Nick returned to the ship still wondering how he would manage to steal the bingo card from a lifeboat . . .

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On Tuesday they were anchored off Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, using the ship's tenders for the shore excursions. Seating and storage on the tenders was quite different from the slightly smaller open lifeboats. Nick assumed they had a full stock of bingo cards on board, but he had no opportunity to check, with other passengers and crew members always present.

As they waited on the dock for their tour bus—a small vehicle with open sides that held about fifteen people—he noticed Dolores Franz standing by herself, away from the other passengers. "Hello again," he said, tipping the peaked cap he'd worn against the tropic sun.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Velvet." She smiled slightly, then asked, "What luck have you had?"

"None, so far."

"You only have until tomorrow night."

"How was your husband going to do it?"

"Climb into the lifeboat and get it."

"He knew where it was?"

"He said he did."

"Where did that card number come from?"

"It was sent to him in a telegram just before we sailed."

"What else did the message say?"

"Nothing else," she insisted. "I saw it. There was only the number."

"Had he done this before, with the bingo card?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Was the card always hidden in the same lifeboat?"

"I don't— No, it was in different boats. I remember him saying this one wouldn't be too difficult."

"Nicky," Gloria called, "our tour bus is here!"

"I'll have it tomorrow night," Nick assured Dolores Franz.

They took a winding mountainous road that crossed the island to a lovely sandy beach on the opposite side. Gloria went wading in the gentle surf while Nick watched from a distance, then they sat and relaxed with a couple of beers on the shady terrace of a little cafe.

"It's a good life," Gloria decided. "I could stay here forever."

"You could, but I couldn't. I have a job to do aboard the *Antilles* tonight."

"Be careful. Don't do anything foolish at your age."

"My mother told me the same thing when I was fifteen . . ."

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Nick left their stateroom just after midnight and made his way to the boat deck above them. He was dressed in black slacks and sweater to protect against being seen and also to add a layer of warmth against the strong nighttime breeze. The door to the railed balcony by lifeboat ten was kept locked, but opening it presented no difficulty. Getting to the boat itself was another matter. It could be lowered from where he stood, but it was still a good six feet over to the boat itself. Simon Franz had been a younger man than Nick by a couple of decades, and perhaps that distance had presented no obstacle. Nick opened his kit of special tools.

He took two heavy-duty suction cups from the kit and attached them to the palms of his hands. Then he began climbing up one of the metal mooring posts that held the lifeboat in place. Each was shaped like an inverted "J" and with the help of the suction cups he was able to clamber up the left one with ease. Then he swung himself down into the boat, which was uncovered, relying on a drainage hose to remove any rainwater.

Once in the boat, it took Nick only a minute to locate the supply chest with its hundred or so bingo cards. He hoped his hunch about the boat number had been correct.

He missed it the first time through, and cursed his luck. Then he looked more carefully and spotted it, right near the top.

Card number 253.

He slipped it under his sweater and returned the other cards to the supply chest. He climbed back to the deck the same way he'd come, deciding he was still in pretty good shape.

When he reached his own deck, he stopped to examine his prize for a moment before returning to the stateroom. It looked pretty much like all the others he'd seen:

card 253

B	*I*	*N*	*G*	*O*
3	17	22	47	63
6	20	31	50	66
9	23	W	52	57
11	25	75	55	70
14	27	45	58	71

"Is that you, Velvet?" a voice called to him. He turned to see Herbert Black coming toward him. "Fierce breeze tonight."

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"It is," Nick agreed.

"What's that you've got?"

"One of the bingo cards from inside. I forgot to turn it in after the game."

"I didn't know they played at night. Marnie and I have been at the casino ourselves. She won twenty dollars at blackjack."

"Good for her." Nick showed him the bingo card. "You two are familiar with the game. Do you notice anything odd about this card?"

"No, not really."

"It has a W in the center space instead of the words Free Play."

"You're right—it's a British bingo card. We use a W for Win. But why would one of the bingo cards be British?"

Nick shrugged. "Beats me. A mistake, I suppose. I won't worry about it."

Black fell into stride with him. "I enjoy walking the deck just before bedtime. Marnie's always dead tired, but this makes me sleep better."

"I expect to sleep well tonight," Nick told him. "I've had an invigorating day."

Wednesday, on St. Thomas, Nick and Gloria strolled through the crowded streets of Charlotte Amalie, the little portside town filled with jewelry and linen shops. There were passengers off a half dozen cruise ships, many already carrying bags of expensive purchases. "I might see something I like," Gloria decided after looking in a few shop windows.

"Why don't you look around for an hour or so?" Nick suggested. "I'll meet you back at the dock at one-thirty." He'd telephoned Dolores Franz's stateroom before they left the ship, arranging to meet her in front of the Charlotte Amalie post office at one o'clock. The bingo card was inside his shirt, and he planned to deliver it in return for the balance of the money.

"Let's have a quick lunch first," Gloria suggested. "I'm spoiled by that big buffet on the ship every day."

They found a place in one of the narrow shop-lined alleyways. Over a sandwich, Nick asked, "Have you noticed any British people on board besides the Blacks?"

She thought about it. "There's a woman in that group of sales reps—I think her name is Elizabeth something. Elizabeth Armstrong. She seems quite nice. I met her when I was lounging in a deck chair yesterday. Why do you ask?"

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"I may want to speak with her."

They parted after lunch and Nick headed along the main shopping street toward the post office indicated on his map across from an unimposing two-story building called the Grand Hotel just around the corner from a small park with a statue of some local hero. He saw Dolores at once, leaning unsteadily against the post-office building as crowds of tourists hurried by.

He hurried up to her. "What's wrong?"

"I—" Her eyes glazed as she tried to focus on him. "My arm—"

He slid up the sleeve of her white blouse and saw the mark of the needle. "Dolores, who did this?"

She was sinking to the pavement and he could no longer hold her up. "She's ill," he told a man who stopped to help. "Call an ambulance!"

He waited with her while a crowd collected around them until the ambulance came. As she was being lifted onto the stretcher, he told one of the white-coated attendants, "She's a passenger on my ship, the *Antilles*. How does it look?"

The grim-faced attendant shook his head. "Drug overdose. I've seen 'em before."

"Stay here," the ambulance driver said. "We'll want your name."

But Nick preferred to fade into the crowd. He knew his money was probably in Dolores Franz's purse, but there was no way he could take it now. Instead, he walked back to the dock and met Gloria.

On their way back to the ship, he told her what had happened. Once they were back in their stateroom, she asked him, "What are you going to do with the bingo card?"

"I don't know. It was valuable to Simon Franz and to his wife. I suspect it's valuable to the person that killed them both, but I don't know who that is."

He took out the card and studied it. "I think I'll go looking for Mr. Perkins," he said.

Nick found the short man with the receding hairline in one of the cocktail lounges, enjoying a pre-dinner drink. "I'm looking for a British lady named Elizabeth Armstrong, Mr. Perkins. I understand she's with your group."

"Certainly. We all dine together and we usually drink together, too. She's right over at that table there."

Elizabeth Armstrong proved to be a stout woman with an infec-

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tious laugh. Nick had noticed her earlier without being aware of her name. "Someone looking for me?" she asked. "As long as it's a man!"

The people at her table joined in the laughter as Nick drew her aside. "I want to ask you a question, Mrs. Armstrong."

"It's Miss Armstrong, and the answer is yes!"

Nick laughed, showing he could go along with the joke. "It'll only take a minute," he told her.

She rose and followed him away from the table.

He asked his question and she answered it. Somehow it was the answer he'd been expecting. "Thank you, Miss Armstrong," he said fervently.

He left the lounge amidst more laughter and went out to one of the ship's bulletin boards, near the front office. It was one of several places where a map of the Caribbean was posted, with a red line showing the ship's daily progress. It was on its way back now, heading west northwest toward the Bahamas and Nassau. Next to the map, the exact locations at various times of the day were duly noted.

He read them and nodded, knowing at last what he had to do.

Thursday was spent at sea, a bit roughly, sailing toward the ship's next landfall. Nick spent the day making certain preparations, which involved a ship-to-shore telephone call and a meeting with the ship's captain and chief security officer. Nick wasn't in the habit of working with authorities of any kind, but this time seemed different. When Dolores Franz had died virtually in his arms, something had changed.

Much later, past midnight, as the *Antilles* was cruising through the Ragged Island Range and beginning to turn north northwest toward Nassau, there was some unusual activity on B deck, where passengers usually disembarked for the ship's tenders. The door in the side of the ship had been opened by one of the cabin stewards and one of the ship's bulky inflatable life rafts was being pushed out into the night sea.

At that moment, Nick stepped into view. "There will be some delay in your delivery," he told the taller of the two men. "The United States Coast Guard has a cruiser out there."

Herbert Black turned from his task. "I should have killed you along with the woman." He started for Nick, and something glistened in his hand, but now the corridor was filled with ship's officers and armed Coast Guardsmen.

"Be careful!" Nick shouted as they moved in. "He has a needle!"

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Black dropped the hypodermic to the floor and ground it underfoot as they moved in to take him.

Nick sat in the deserted main deck lounge with the ship's captain, a Coast Guard officer, and a man from the Drug Enforcement Agency, trying to explain at two in the morning how he'd known exactly where fifty pounds of uncut cocaine was to be dropped from the *Antilles* into the Atlantic Ocean.

"It was the bingo card," he told them, passing it around for their examination. "The drug dealers who were receiving the shipment had a virtually foolproof method of arranging delivery. The cocaine was delivered to the ship with ordinary supplies at one of our ports of call. The crew member assisting Simon Franz hid it somewhere below deck. Meanwhile, the drug dealers had hidden a bingo card on board with delivery instructions. Franz was sent the number of that bingo card and nothing more. If he had been arrested or the message intercepted, nothing would have happened. Again, if the bingo card was discovered without knowing the plan, its message would have been unreadable."

"Why was Franz killed?" the DEA man asked.

"Because Herbert Black heard about the scheme and decided he'd take it over. He killed Franz and waited for his wife Dolores to lead him to the hidden bingo card. Unfortunately for her, she hired me to steal it. I ran into Black with the card in my hand and asked him to look at it. Once he'd seen it, he didn't need Dolores Franz alive any more. He injected her with an overdose of cocaine, just as he'd done her husband."

"This card does look a bit strange," the captain commented.

"Of course it does, in two ways. First, there's the W in the center free space, and, second, the four numbers in that *N* line are 22–31–75–45. Any bingo player will tell you that the numbers are listed consecutively on the cards, so they're easy to locate quickly, and the *N* row always contains numbers from 31 through 45. On that card, the numbers 22 and 75 are misplaced."

"I'll be damned!"

"The entire middle row is a careful paste-up job. My misfortune in showing the card to Black solved the mystery, even though it also led to Dolores Franz's death. Anyone who'd played bingo like Black did would have spotted those wrong numbers at once when I asked him if there was anything wrong with the card. And when I asked him specifically about the letter W in the middle, he said it stood

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for Win on British bingo cards. I've been to England a couple of times and I didn't think this was true, but I sought out a British lady and asked her, just to be certain. She told me British bingo cards have no free-play space at all. There are twenty-five numbers on every card. So Black had lied about that."

"But what do the numbers mean?" the DEA man asked. The others didn't have to ask. "And how did you know where to find this particular card?"

"I'll answer the last question first. If the message to Franz contained only the number 253 and that told him not only the number of the bingo card but in which of fourteen lifeboats it was hidden, there could only be one explanation. I added the three digits of 253 together and came up with lifeboat number ten. You may want to check the other lifeboats for similar cards that could be used on future voyages."

"And the numbers?"

"Obviously it was the center, or *N*, row that was gimmicked. What do we have there? *N*–22–31–W–75–45. What else could it be but latitude and longitude? Latitude 22 degrees, 31 minutes north, longitude 75 degrees, 45 minutes west. Our exact location, as the crew member could verify to Black, when the cocaine was to be dumped."

The Coast Guard officer said, "We have the yacht that was waiting for the pickup. They had other cocaine on board."

"You'll want to question the crew member," Nick suggested. "He was probably the one who first tipped off Herbert Black." He yawned and got to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"It's been a long night and my wife will be looking for me," Nick said. "I'm going to try and get some sleep."

Friday morning, as the ship docked in Nassau, Gloria finished hearing about the night's activities. "I'm glad you were working with the law for once," she told him. "Are you giving up that other life?"

"This was special," Nick said. "I owed it to Dolores Franz."

"And you didn't take any money for it."

"Well, I still have my down payment. Come on—" he took her hand "—I'll buy you something at the straw market."

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a *NEW* short story by

JEAN POTTS

"Things are apt to be livelier with her on the premises," Jackson told his mother.

"You mean because she's younger than me and the other tenants?"

"Younger. And a sexpot."

"What?" *Annie's jaw dropped. In her mind she saw Liz's face, the high round forehead, the clear blue eyes, the primly buttoned-up mouth. There was a quaint look about her, rather like a primitive artist's portrait of a child. "She's nothing of the sort!"*

"Nothing else but. Trust me, Ma. This is one area where I'm a better judge than you are."

Jean Potts has been contributing stories to EQMM since 1957. Of her mystery fiction, Kathleen L. Maio writes in Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers: *"Her exploration of the effects of violence on lifelike characters is no mean accomplishment. Her steady eye, quiet wit, and unfailing compassion make her an important contributor to the modern mystery novel." And the mystery short story . . .*

THE LADY MACBETH CASE

by JEAN POTTS

"Well, what do you think of her?" Annie asked when she could no longer bear the suspense. For her son, who had driven down to Manhattan from his beloved country retreat for the express purpose of meeting the new tenant, was now putting on his poker-face, no-comment act. He had seemed to be favorably impressed by the young woman who had just left after their little visit. But his

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silence must mean that he disapproved of the decision Annie had made—on her own, without consulting him as she usually did.

She needn't have been in such a hurry. A vacancy in a house like hers—one in a block of other small brownstones—wasn't going to go begging. Only four apartments, each a floor through, and one of them Annie's, her home for thirty years, ever since she and Jack were married. She had stayed on after his death, hadn't given a second thought to leaving. Unlike their son, who had grown up here, but was off on this rural kick. Claimed a weekend of New York life was all he could take (as he did, most weekends, with no noticeable signs of suffering).

Still not a word out of him.

"Jackson," she said through her clenched teeth, "if you're not going to tell me—"

"Now, now. Take it easy. I was just trying to figure out who it is she reminds me of, where I might have seen her before. Oh, well, let it go. She seems okay to me, this Liz what's her name. Grant? Yeah, Liz Grant. As long as you're satisfied. It's your house, you live here, it's up to you to pick who else does." He grinned at her, the same disarming grin his father had had before him. Annie, limp with relief, smiled back at him tremulously. He added, "Things are apt to be livelier with her on the premises."

"You mean because she's younger than me and the other tenants?"

"Younger. And a sexpot."

"What?" Annie's jaw dropped. In her mind she saw Liz's face, the high round forehead, the clear blue eyes, the primly buttoned-up mouth. There was a quaint look about her, rather like a primitive artist's portrait of a child. "She's nothing of the sort!"

"Nothing else but. Trust me, Ma. This is one area where I'm a better judge than you are." He took a sip of his drink and went on thoughtfully. "She's an expensive little item. No bargain-basement clothes or junk jewelry for her. Who's footing the bills? Maybe she has a rich oil-baron-type husband back there in Texas where she came from. Or how about a nice fat alimony coming her way every month? Of course—I bet that's it."

Annie sighed. It was a sore point with him: when he and his wife parted, she had taken him for the last penny she could gouge out of him. Not that he was making a fortune out of his used-book business. But he had developed a couple of specialties that brought in a steady income. And the work suited him. He liked being his

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own boss, on his own hours. And best of all, he could run the operation from his country place.

"Don't be such a male chauvinist. She could be paying her own way. And I told you, she has this project, researching a Thirteenth Century Italian artist, nobody I ever heard of—she thinks he may be worth a biography. It's great having someone around who's interested in more than the price of beans. Brightens me up."

Give him credit, he capitulated. "I wasn't really objecting. Just speculating." With a flourish, he lifted his glass. "Here's to Liz. Long may she prosper."

Pleasantly aglow, Annie joined him in toasting the new tenant.

The following weekend Jackson was tied up with a new delivery of books and skipped his New York visit. Annie didn't miss him too much. She was busy herself, helping Liz Grant get settled in.

Money was apparently of no concern to Liz: she had brought nothing with her from Texas and was on a glorious shopping spree. While waiting for the new big stuff to arrive, she made do with the basics which Annie—who got a vicarious thrill out of all this—lent her. They had daily consultations about rugs, curtains, appliances.

Occasionally their conversations took a more personal turn, though of the two Annie was a good deal more free and easy about telling the story of her life. Liz was ready enough to talk about her childhood: she had grown up poor and motherless, the daughter of a Missouri tenant farmer who beat her up when he was drunk. She had worked her way through two years of college and escaped to Texas. But her confidences ended there. Only once did she refer to her husband. (Yes, there had been one.) He had died suddenly a year or so ago.

Which no doubt explained the look of desolation and sorrow that now and then swept over her face.

Annie didn't tell Jackson how much she was seeing of Liz. He would say she was being overtrusting again, getting too friendly with someone she knew too little about.

And she certainly didn't mention Liz's friend Pete who blew in from Texas later in the second week. Without advance notice. When Liz didn't answer her bell, he tried Annie's. She assumed it was another United Parcel delivery and buzzed him in—a tall, well built fellow with a crooked nose and an engaging smile. He had a courtly air, a glint in his eyes that gave him—but this, too, was engaging—a touch of the rascal. Sweeping off his wide-brimmed hat, he intro-

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duced himself as a friend of Miz Grant from way back and apologized, in his easygoing drawl, for any inconvenience he might be causing Annie. Maybe, if it wasn't too much trouble, he could leave a message with her?

No trouble at all, Annie assured him. "There," she added, at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, "that's probably her now."

It was Liz, all right. Or Beth, which seemed to be his name for her. "Hey there, Beth." He swung her off her feet, shopping bags and all, and kissed her hungrily. "Surprised you, didn't I?"

"You shouldn't have, Pete." There was a flash of something like panic in Liz's—Beth's—face. "I told you not to. Pete, put me down."

"Yes, ma'am." He gave her a mocking grin. But he obeyed at once. "I'm much obliged to this kind lady for letting me in. I wonder would she care to join us for a drink."

Annie knew better than to accept the invitation. Something was going on between these two, something a lot more complicated than Pete had indicated. The fierce way he had kissed Liz told a different story. All right, a love affair, one that had gone awry. That would explain—wouldn't it?—the undercurrent of tension in the air.

Annie watched as they started up the stairs to Liz's apartment on the next floor. Pete had taken charge of her shopping bags—his other arm encircling her, as if to forestall a possible attempt at escape. Next to him, she looked no bigger than a child, and every bit as defenseless.

The next afternoon, Friday, Jackson arrived ahead of time and in extra fine fettle: lots of good items in the latest batch of books. "And, Ma," he said as he dumped his knapsack on the sofa, spilling some of its contents, "remember it was bugging me why Liz what's her name looked so familiar to me? Well, wait till I get a beer and I'll tell you about it. You want anything to drink?" A cup of tea, she told him. While he was out in the kitchen, her attention shifted to the half open knapsack and the gaudy-covered magazines that had slid out. True crime stories, one of his specialties. There were some newspaper clippings, too: bold black headlines, something about somebody being cleared.

"A sensational trial." Jackson was back with his beer and her tea. "Even for Texas. Has she ever mentioned her husband's death to you?"

"Just that they'd only been married about a year. And that he died suddenly."

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"He sure did. Cheers. Somebody shot the old boy. He was twice her age, and rich as sin."

"What? You mean— You expect me to believe that Liz—? Never! Never in this world."

"Well, she didn't pull the trigger. Half the town could vouch for that. She had the lead role in a play the little-theater group was putting on. In plain sight—and twenty miles away from the scene of the crime—on stage except for three brief breaks to change costumes. Nobody had as strong a motive—she stood to inherit a fortune—but nobody had her unbreakable alibi, either. That's what got her off the hook. Otherwise she'd have been the one on trial for murder instead of the old man's nephew."

"His nephew," Annie echoed feebly. Something stirred in her memory. Slipped away before she could pin it down.

"You didn't know about the nephew? No, of course not." Jackson settled back comfortably. "With Liz ruled out, who else was left? It had to be someone the old man knew. No signs of a break-in, nothing stolen or missing, except for his gun. It was found—and proved to be the murder weapon—a couple of weeks later, in the creek. The nephew had a motive of sorts. He was named in the old boy's will—a token legacy, peanuts compared to what Liz got. His alibi couldn't be compared to hers, either. The prosecuting attorneys made a pretty good case against him. Not good enough, though. The jury wound up acquitting him of murder, first and second degree, *and* manslaughter."

"That's the end of it? Nobody's ever going to know who did it?"

"The official word is that the case is still open. It could be. Plenty of people are still convinced he's guilty, and furthermore that Liz is, too, and should have been put on trial along with him."

"But her alibi—"

"She could have plotted it and finagled him into doing the actual shooting. Especially if they were having an affair. According to the busybodies, that's how it was. You know, the Lady Macbeth bit. 'But screw your courage to the sticking place,' and so on. In fact, it came to be known as the Lady Macbeth case. Some tabloid reporter thought of it first—down in Texas, her nickname was Beth—and the others picked it up."

Annie remembered now. Lady Macbeth. The name had caught her attention, a condensed version in a New York paper. Oh, Liz, she thought. If Pete was the nephew, then—

Jackson, apparently unaware of the state she was in, went on

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with his story. "Tongues started wagging long before the murder. Naturally—with the richest man in the county marrying an attractive chick young enough to be his granddaughter. And with a womanizer of a nephew who visited his dear old uncle a good deal oftener after the wedding than before. Or so the gossips said. It's never been proven."

There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs. A little burst of laughter. The doorbell chimed, Liz's double ring.

"Oh, Lord," Annie whispered. She started for the door, then turned back toward Jackson. He was sitting on the sofa, where he had tossed his knapsack. "Just a minute, Liz!" she called, and signaled Jackson to hide the clippings out of sight.

When he had, she opened the door. There they were, arm in arm, both of them radiating euphoria. No trace of the strain that had marked their reunion yesterday. Now all was bliss.

They had come to invite Annie and her son for a drink in Beth's apartment—she wanted to show off that whatchacallit hanging on the wall, Pete explained fondly, and, besides, he owed Annie for her kindness in letting him in when he showed up yesterday.

It had been so brief, the flash of startled recognition in Jackson's eyes at the sight of Pete. Now his face showed only genial attention. But Annie had seen that flash—the others were too wrapped up in themselves to notice it—and it wiped out what little doubt remained as to the identity of the nephew.

In a daze, she followed the others upstairs, sipped her drink along with them, laughed when they did, registered interest, surprise, whatever seemed called for.

When the downstairs buzzer sounded, Pete, who was closer to the intercom than anyone else, said, "I'll get it. —Yes? Who is it?"

The answer came through tinnily but audible to one and all. "Valerie. —Well, aren't you going to let me in?"

There was a short, electrified pause. Pete stiffened. He shot an uneasy glance at Liz.

"Surprise, surprise," she said and gave him a chilling smile.

"So help me, Beth, I didn't know she was here."

"Oh, of course not. Mercy me, what an idea! You told me yourself, you're through with her."

"And I'm telling you now, I haven't seen or heard from her in months." His face had gone hard and stone-cold, as fixed in bitterness as Liz/Beth's.

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So much for the radiant bliss they had started out with.

"Pete! Are you there?" Valerie's voice was sharp, demanding.

"Just a minute, I'll be right down." He slammed up the intercom and took off.

"Sorry about that." Liz tried for breeziness. Then, in tense silence, she took up her post at the open doorway.

Pete not only came back, he brought Valerie with him. Or maybe it was the other way around—she had a no-nonsense grip on his arm.

She was wearing a leather coat and boots. A big pouch of a bag was slung over her shoulder. Very trendy. And she was a real stunner, this Valerie. Blonde shoulder-length hair, luscious mouth, bosom to match.

"Valerie, how nice to see you again," Liz said sweetly, sweetly. Her eyes were ablaze. "You'll have a drink, won't you? Unless, of course, you and Pete have other plans."

"Have we, Pete? None that *I* know of." She must be from Texas, too: she had the same easygoing drawl as Pete. "Thank you, Beth dear, I'd love a martini."

"Whatever you say. I'm sure Pete knows how you like it." With that, Liz remembered her other guests and whizzed through the introductions she had neglected until now. She wound up with the suggestion—strictly perfunctory—that they have another drink.

"We'd better not, thank you anyway." Jackson was already on his feet and urged Annie onto hers with a firm grip on her arm. "We've had our quota, haven't we, Ma?"

There was a routine murmur of protest. A chorus of goodbyes. Relief all around.

Outside in the hallway, Annie gave way to the ache in her throat and let the tears spill over. Which threw Jackson into a fit of consternation. "Don't cry, Ma, please—"

"I can't help it. Poor Liz, we should have stayed with her, she might need help—"

"Listen to me, Ma. Our best bet is to stay out of this, whatever it is. We could be letting ourselves in for trouble. Big trouble. Besides, it's none of our business."

"How can you say that? I'm not going to leave her in the lurch without even bothering to find out what's going on." Her tears dried up as if by magic. She pulled away from Jackson, who had steered her down the first couple of steps, and turned back purposefully, but not to Liz's apartment—to the catchall, an odd leftover from pre-

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renovation days tucked away next to Liz's living room. A good place to store stuff that might come in handy someday. And, more to the point at the moment, a good place to eavesdrop.

"All right. If you're determined," said Jackson.

"I am," said Annie.

Thus ended their whispered conversation. She opened the catchall door, and he followed her into the airless dusk and clutter and the familiar smell of mothballs and furniture polish.

Next door, glasses clinked. Ice cubes rattled. And they were all talking at once. If they kept this up, thought Annie, eavesdropping was a waste of time.

Then Valerie's voice came through, razor-sharp. "You know perfectly well what you owe me. You think you can dump me? Think again, buster—and you, too, Lady Macbeth."

"Don't call me that!"

"Sorry, it just slipped out. You prefer Beth Baby, I suppose. Some baby! Undersized, I grant you, but you're sure-God not helpless. You've been running the show for Pete ever since you first laid eyes on him. You whistled and he hopped to it. And when he wound up on trial for murder, it wasn't you got him cleared, it was me. I swore on the Bible he was with me that night, and I finagled the motel clerk into backing me up."

Again their voices jumbled together, impossible to sort out. More ice-cube rattling and clinking of glasses.

Finally—"Whoa! Hold it!" Pete's voice rose above the gibberish. "Nothing has to be settled tonight. Why don't we just leave it for some other time, talk it over friendly-like when we're not so het up? We may have a few little differences—"

"You bet we have," Valerie said, shriller than ever. "And they're not little. I know what you two are up to. You're fixing to do me out of what I have coming to me. Well, you'd better get this straight, once and for all—I'm running the show now. Either you play it my way or you wind up back in the courtroom, on trial again."

"That's a lot of bull! I was acquitted. They can't try me again!"

"Not for murder, no. But neither of you has been tried for conspiracy to commit murder. Who's going to clear you this time?"

After a long pause: "Val honey—"

"Please. Save your sweet talk for Beth Baby here. Between the two of you, you've worked it all out, haven't you? Once you're married—after a decent interval, of course—you split all that pretty money, bags of it—not just the insurance. Oh, yes, I know Beth Baby

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has made a will leaving everything to her beloved late husband's beloved nephew. Only you forgot about me. Sorry to be a spoilsport, but—"

Liz broke in, as clipped and cool as ever. Almost. "I'm sorry, too, but I must ask you to leave now. Out, please. I'm not taking any more of this."

"Am I allowed to finish my drink? And I haven't given you your present yet."

"Good. Fine." Pete again, ready with oil for the troubled waters. "Like I said, no need to settle it tonight. You finish your drink, Val—and, Beth, you open your present. Then I'll take Val down, put her in a cab, and come back up. Tomorrow's time enough to talk over our differences. We ought to be able to work something out."

Valerie, smugly: "I'm sure we will."

Liz was evidently going along with his program for tonight. There was a rustling of paper as she unwrapped her present, a clatter and a shriek as she dropped it on the parquet floor. Annie and Jackson, poised for a quick exit down the stairs, all but jumped out of their shoes at that shriek.

"What—what is this?" Liz was barely audible.

"As if you didn't know!" A mean bark of a laugh from Valerie. "You know, all right. Yes, dear, this is a dagger that you see before you. And when the time comes, you'll know what to do with it."

"Beth Baby," Pete pleaded, "it's just a letter opener. Antique Italian. I told Val you like that stuff."

"We better get out of here," whispered Jackson, "before it's too late."

They made it with precious little time to spare. A few minutes later they heard the sounds of Pete and Valerie departing—the click of the lock upstairs, the thud of footsteps, finally his voice calling out to Liz, "I'll be right back, love, once I find a cab for Val!"

Annie dropped down into the nearest chair. Jackson headed for the kitchen and another beer. "You all right, Ma?"

The doorbell chimed, Liz's double ring. "I just wanted to apologize," she said when Annie opened the door. "I'm sorry you had to witness that disgraceful scene."

"These things happen," Annie said. "Come in and have a cup of tea. You look a little tired."

Liz looked not only worn to a frazzle but benumbed, in a state of shock. And now Annie saw the ornate stiletto in her hand. Liz herself

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seemed unaware of it until Annie asked for a closer look. "Oh, this. A housewarming present from Valerie. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very pretty. But you could do plenty of damage with this little trinket. Really, Liz, it's not the kind of thing you should be carrying around. How about if I keep it for you? I can lock it up with my carving knives."

Liz handed it over without protest. "Thanks for inviting me in, but Pete's just seeing Valerie into a cab, he'll be back any minute." With that, she reached out and hugged Annie, who was too astonished at this unprecedented gesture to move a muscle. A whispered good night, then Liz was off up the stairs, not looking back on the way.

"Let's hope Pete really does come back," said Jackson as Annie shut the door.

"Of course he'll come back! They'll make it up like they did before. They're in love with each other."

"I know—that's what got them into this mess in the first place, not just the money." Jackson brooded. "And that's why he'll make a deal with Valerie—for Liz's sake as well as his own. Valerie has them both where she wants them. There's no other way to keep her mouth shut."

So it was settled, thought Annie. No more hoping against hope that Pete would show up tonight. Valerie would see to it that he didn't. Because it wasn't just the money with her, either. Pete had left her for Liz. That was the part that galled her the most. What sweet revenge if she were to get him back from Liz.

"Look, Ma, I know you like Liz," Jackson was saying, "but you have to admit what we heard tonight is pretty damning stuff, actual evidence that ought to be reported—"

"Never! You breathe a word to anybody, *anybody*, and I'll swear you're lying. And I'll disown you. We had no business eavesdropping on her, let alone reporting what we heard. If Liz was involved in something bad, the least we can do is give her the benefit of the doubt."

"Well, but—" He hesitated.

Annie prompted him fiercely, "Promise!"

"All right," he said at last. "I promise. You want it in writing?"

They smiled at each other in a half hearted way.

After that they waited. For what? For the unknown something that was going to happen. How still it was, thought Annie, not a

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tick of sound, as if the whole house was holding its breath, waiting for the strange, menacing stillness to break.

Jackson thumped his beer can down. "Don't look like that, Ma. You could be borrowing trouble. Pete hasn't come back, and he's not going to. Why get into a tizzy over what this will do to Liz before you have all the facts?"

"What facts? You said yourself—"

"All right. I said it. A while back. We don't know what's happened since then. He could have phoned Liz and patched it all up."

"Oh, stop it, I'm not fool enough to buy that." She stood up, full of purpose. "Out of my way. I'm going up there and see what goes with Liz."

"No," he said, with such authority that she stopped in her tracks. "I'll go. You stay here. You'd better let me have your house key. Just in case."

Dazed into silence, she obeyed. When he was gone, she stood still, rooted to the rug. Those words of his could mean only one thing: he was in as much of a tizzy as she was. And all that nonsense about borrowing trouble—what was that but an attempt to reassure himself as well as her?

But they could both be wrong.

Only a few minutes passed before he came back down the stairs—fast. One look at his face and Annie knew, all too surely, that they had not been wrong.

Her knees threatened to buckle. Jackson grabbed hold of her just in time and guided her to the sofa, where he sat beside her, his arm around her. "I'm sorry, Ma, but she—" He gave up and simply blurted it out. "She's dead." Annie caught her breath. Then he told her the rest. The door was locked, so he'd used the key. There was no sign of a break-in or a struggle. But there was this note. He handed it to her, a folded slip from a memo pad.

"I shouldn't have taken it. But it has your name on it." He stood up.

"What are you—"

"Calling the police. We have to, Ma."

"But you haven't said yet— I took the stiletto away from her."

"Cyanide, from the look of it. Quicker than the stiletto. Her own way, not Valerie's. I suppose it was all too much for her. Pete letting her down. Valerie laying it on the line with the stiletto—"

And the guilt, thought Annie. She looked down at the note in her lap, still folded. She was not quite ready to read it. The hug that

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had come as such a surprise to her. Liz must have been set on her own death then. Now, with the note, she was saying her final goodbye to the only friend she had left in the world.

Jackson had made his call. Back beside her, he watched as she read the few lines scrawled on the memo pad. "I thought I could live with it but I can't, I can't. Dear Annie, thank you for—" There the pen had skidded off, leaving the message unfinished.

Jackson said, "We don't have to mention the note if you'd rather not."

"It doesn't matter." They would find out, anyway. The Lady Macbeth case was still open, waiting to be solved. But the Lady herself would not be available. Like the guilt-ridden Lady of the play, she had found the solution on her own.

"Liz—oh, Liz," Annie whispered. She hid her face against Jackson's shoulder and wept.

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Kinky called first. Eddie hadn't heard from him in years. He was a CPA in Dayton. Same old stuff. Divorced going on five years. Lost his wife and kids to the booze. Now he went to AA meetings two, three times a week. Said he got his blue chip last week. Eddie wasn't sure what that meant but he seemed proud of it in a sad kind of way.

Flip Jarrett started writing when he was eleven. He wrote poetry until 1980, when he began writing short stories: "My stories were in the sci-fi/horror genre. Last November I was in the library and saw Kinky Friedman's name on a mystery novel. Being an old Nashville hippie, I recognized the name from his 'Texas Jewboys' days and had to read his book. I was immediately, as they say, hooked through the gills. I went back and checked out a stack of novels and back issues of your magazine. I figured what the hell, there were only so many ways to describe blood gushing out around a stake in a vampire's heart and I had about used up my share.

"I'm thirty-nine and dropped out of West Virginia University in 1972 one semester short of a sheepskin. I have five children and work a full-time job in three twelve-hour shifts over the weekends. I'm working on a novel and keeping my head open for short-story ideas."

An auspicious formula: reading, somehow finding the time from making a living to write, and "keeping one's head open" for ideas . . .

"Q"

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THE GAME

by FLIP JARRETT

It was Johnny who thought up the game we played every day the summer of '64. We played in the lowland on the edge of town between the railroad tracks and the sawmill. Johnny, Billy O., Kinky, and me.

Three of us would hide in the scrubby bushes and stunted trees and the fourth would wait on the other side of the high-banked railroad tracks until they were set. Then the one who was It would cross the tracks and slip into the edge of the brush. The game was for him to find us one at a time and sneak up and tag us on the back of the head before we saw him. If we spotted the guy who was It first, we could circle around and take him out. Billy O., Kinky, and I called the game Ambush Tag.

Johnny called it Murder.

You had to be It till you got all three, then the ones who'd been tagged would play one potato two potato to see who was It next. Kinky was It once for three whole weeks. Billy O. and I did better. But Johnny was never It longer than one game.

That was the summer I was fourteen. Kinky's Mom and Dad split up the next year and he went to live in Cleveland with his grandparents. Billy O. left town at seventeen to join the Navy. I did six years in the Army in Germany and the Mediterranean pushing papers and writing requisitions, and came home in '74. Johnny ran away a week before high-school graduation and never came back.

I got work with the post office. I had a country route that took me down the Sawmill Road every afternoon at 1:15. The sawmill was long gone. The land had been sold to a developer from New York but he had left it alone. There'd been talk of a big shopping mall but the town was too far from Cincinnati and nothing came of it.

I'd sometimes stop when I was running ahead. I'd pull my right-hand-drive Jeep off onto the gravel at the side of the road and smoke a cigarette and look across the lowland to the rise of the tracks. You think about life a lot when you drive 150 miles a day putting seed catalogues in farmers' mailboxes.

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Life hadn't been bad to me. Stayed out of Vietnam, got a good job, married a good woman, and had three kids. One was married now and working on a grandchild, another was on the Cincinnati P.D., and the third, just out of Ohio U., was teaching at a high school up in Parma near the lake.

Kinky called me first. I hadn't heard from him in years. He was a CPA in Dayton. Same old stuff. Divorced going on five years. Lost his wife and kids to the booze. Now he goes to AA meetings two, three times a week. Said he got his blue chip last week. I wasn't sure what he meant but he seemed proud of it in a sad kind of way.

I got a letter from Billy O. about a month later. He washed out of the Navy after twelve years. Him and another guy got caught in a gun turret. It was either take an honorable discharge at the end of his hitch or stay and fight it and end up with a psychological.

They both told their stories, then asked the same question: heard anything from Johnny?

I suppose I knew what they had in mind. Maybe it had always been there and we were all just waiting. I told them no but I'd let them know when he got in touch.

I said "when" without even thinking about it.

Johnny showed up at the post office early one morning while I was out back loading up the Jeep. I looked up from sorting the mail into a wooden box with slotted compartments I'd built in my garage workshop my first year on the job. He was wearing a denim jacket and faded jeans. He had longer hair than was fashionable and a Bill Cody beard and moustache.

"Hi, Eddie," he said, like we'd just seen each other in school the other day.

"How's it hanging, Johnny?" I slipped back into the teenage greeting unconsciously.

"Can't complain."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Heard from Billy O. and the Kinster?"

"Yeah."

"Tell them I'm here."

"Sure, Johnny."

He turned and walked away, hands in his pockets and head held back to catch the warmth of the early-morning sun.

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That was it. No explanations, no story of where he'd been or what he'd done. But that was Johnny for you.

I called Billy O. and Kinky that night. I took the cordless phone into the bathroom so my wife couldn't hear. They listened and said okay and hung up.

I pulled off the side of Sawmill Road at exactly 1:15 the next day. A battered Volvo station wagon with a cracked windshield was parked on the lowland side of the road. Kinky sat behind the wheel smoking a pipe and listening to music on the cassette player. I recognized the tune as I walked toward the car. It was the theme from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.*

Kinky looked up when my shadow fell across his face. He knocked his pipe out on the side of the door and put it in a cup-shaped rack on the dash. He turned off the tape and got out.

He was wearing a striped shirt and grey pants. He was three or four inches shorter than me and looked to be edging two hundred pounds. He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his vein-traced nose and gave me a CPA handshake.

We didn't say anything. We just leaned against the side of his car and waited.

Billy O. drove up in a red Datsun 280-Z ten minutes later. He pulled to the other side of the road, got out, waved, and trotted over. He was six feet and skinny as a razor turned sideways. There were a couple of sores on his left cheek and another on the back of his right hand. We didn't offer to shake hands and he shrugged non-committally.

We stood in a row leaning back against the Volvo. I wasn't sure which direction to look. One way seemed just as good as the other.

"Hello!" came Johnny's voice from behind us. He stood on the railroad tracks across the lowlands. He was small in the distance but I could still see the grin on his face.

It took us ten minutes to work our way through the tangle of brush to the tracks. Once Kinky fell and Billy O. helped him up. He nodded gratefully but pulled away from him.

We stood on the tracks—the four of us—in the afternoon sun of a late summer's day.

Johnny spoke first.

"Did you all bring a piece?"

Billy O. smiled at the terminology and pulled a flat, silvery 25-

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caliber automatic from his pocket and held it up in his palm like a gambler in a game showing openers.

I untucked my uniform shirt and took a military-issue Colt from my belt. Johnny nodded approvingly.

Kinky dug down in his pants pocket and came up with a Smith and Wesson .38 Police Special still slick from the grease they packed it in.

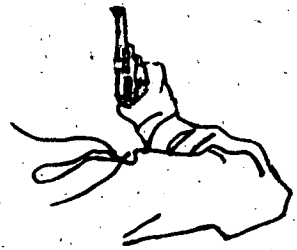
Johnny opened his denim jacket and snapped down a Beretta 9mm from a shoulder holster with practiced ease.

Billy O. started it with a sudden, uncontrolled giggle. I chuckled and Kinky sputtered a gasping snort like an old car starting on a winter morning. Johnny threw back his head and howled a clear and raucous fourteen-year-old's laugh.

We must have stood there laughing for all of fifteen minutes.

When the laughter gradually tapered off, Johnny spoke what was on all our minds.

"Come on, fellas, let's go play the game."



DETECTIVERSE

MOTHER HOOD

by DAVID MARTINDALE

The sons of Ma Barker were strictly no good.
Their forte was bank shots—they pulled all they could.
They'd bring along Mama—
She relished the drama—
And thus gave new meaning to the term motherhood.

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Jimmy arrived in a battered old car with one month to run of an MOT that must have been obtained sight-unseen. All his belongings, nothing much, were in the back of it. It was in the course of the evening that he told them he was just out of jail. He showed no embarrassment about it. When Jennifer's mother asked what for, he said with a shrug: "Breaking-and-entering." So unembarrassed was he that Jennifer thought he was telling the truth, though in fact he was not . . .

LIVING WITH JIMMY

by ROBERT BARNARD

When I think about my mother in those years when I was growing up, the image that comes into my mind is an ashtray—a large, shiny blue one, piled high—the neat brown filter tips nestling in the untidy rubble of grey ash. Eventually, when no more could be got into it, the ashtray would be tipped into the rubbish bin under the sink, but never washed. Then the process of filling it would begin over again. It stays in my mind, this ashtray, a still life in blue, brown, and grey—an image of my mother's boredom: I bored her, her life with me bored her, she bored herself. You can imagine how interesting my life was.

Stinginess is unfortunately not one of my father's many faults. If he had been stingier then perhaps my mother would have been forced to get a job, find someone to mind me after school and in the holidays, see new people, perhaps even make friends. That way she might have met someone or done something interesting we could have talked about when I came home from school. But as it was, the alimony or maintenance money (she never said what it was, just

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calling it "my money" when the check came in the post) arrived regularly, and was apparently generous. We never wanted for anything. And meanwhile my mother did a bit of cooking, a bit of housework, a bit of shopping, and went quietly mad with boredom, of which the filter tips in the ashtray were a symbol. I understand this very well now, at fifteen, but I think I understood it even then, though I would not have been able to find words for it. Naturally I worried more about the dismal quality of my own life.

About twice a year my father came to take me out. This enabled us to get to know each other better: he to find out that I was a thoroughly uninteresting little girl, I to find out that he was rather a nasty man. I, of course, hid my more interesting thoughts from him (one would hardly tell them to someone one saw twice a year), while he could not hide his essential qualities from me. The noise of his car starting up to drive him away always sounded in my ears like a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, on those days my mother had been loafing around the house, working up a good, acrid fug. She was never inventive enough to think up anything exciting to do while I was out of the way. She was what the tabloids would call an accident waiting to happen—or a bomb waiting to be exploded. Or a victim waiting to be murdered.

I was with her when she met Jimmy Wildman. It was holiday time, summer, so inevitably I was with her. There were clothes to buy for me for the start of the new school term, and my mother said she was tired of the "filthy" local shops (she had a very limited vocabulary, which put me to shame on the rare occasions when she came to school functions). So we had driven in the little Allegro into Barstow, where we had found new shoes and a new coat for me and done a bit of desultory shopping for her, too. It was a hot day, and my mother had then declared that she felt like a drink—unusually for her, for drink was not one of her problems. We found a pub with would-be rustic wooden tables and benches outside, and my mother went into the bar and got an orange squash for me and a gin and tonic for her.

Whether Jimmy Wildman sat down at the next table with a formed intention of picking her up, I don't know. There were other, more desirable women there that morning, even if you were attracted by the smell of nicotine, and they were unencumbered with a child in attendance. I think I noticed him before my mother did, for I was sitting facing him and I noticed things because the bench was uncomfortable, like all benches.

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He was wearing jeans and a loose denim jacket over an ill-fitting T-shirt. He was big, but I thought it was the bigness of fat as much as of muscle (I was twelve then, you see, and beginning to notice young males and how they looked). His hands were rough, and a dark stubble sprouted on his chin and cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin white, his hair long and greasy. He was very unattractive.

My mother was rummaging in her handbag searching for a new packet of cigarettes and looking rather flushed. "I'm getting hotter and hotter, not cooling down," she muttered.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be drinking gin and tonic," I said, looking round. "Everyone else seems to be drinking beer and lager and stuff like that."

She looked round.

"Do you know, I think you're right," she said in a surprised voice, as if I had never said anything sensible in my life before. She pushed the half finished drink away from her and marched back to the bar, cigarette hanging from her mouth.

It was that, the pushing away of the gin and tonic, that told Jimmy Wildman that my mother had money. Not necessarily loads of money, but the sort of money that means you're not always worrying about money. Enough.

I saw it then, you see, as a matter of money. I can see now that there were other things. Sex, for example. Jimmy was recently out of jail, he was desperate for a woman, and if there were many more attractive women than my mother around, it was also true that they were women Jimmy was not likely to get to bed unless he took a lot of trouble with himself, which would certainly be unlike Jimmy. My mother, like her money, was enough.

"Got a light?"

He took no trouble, you notice, even with his opening gambit.

Within a couple of minutes he was at our table, drinking the remains of my mother's gin and tonic as if he were doing it a favor, and asking about the neighborhood ("wondered whether it would be worthwhile slinging my hook here"). I don't remember much about the conversation, which was not memorable, only that before we left my mother said:

"There's a ladies' lav over there, Jennifer. Go and use it before we get in the car."

"I don't want to go."

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"Do as I say. You'll only grizzle about wanting to go when we're on the road, you know you will."

I had never in my life grizzled in the car about needing to go to the lavatory. I knew then that we had not seen the last of Jimmy. I saw it for certain in the knowing manner with which they said goodbye.

He moved in two nights later. He arrived in the evening in a battered old car with one month to run of an MOT that must have been obtained sight-unseen. All his belongings, nothing much, were in the back of it. It was in the course of the evening that he told us he was just out of jail. He showed no embarrassment about it. When my mother asked what for, he said with a shrug: "Breaking-and-entering." So unembarrassed was he that I thought he was telling the truth, though in fact he was not. He stayed the night as—shocked but fascinated—I had known he would.

I saw him next morning, on his way to the bathroom-lavatory, quite naked. It was the first time I had seen a grown man naked, and I can't say it interested me particularly. I was on my way downstairs, and I thought it would be impolite to take any particular notice. What I did notice, though, was that his sloppy clothes had misled me: there was a lot more muscle than fat. I should have guessed this. You don't get overfed in prison.

When I asked my mother, she said that he'd be stopping for a bit.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked.

"I've been alone for so long," she said, shrugging. This was no grand passion, I concluded. But I said:

"I don't like it."

"I'll see you don't come to any harm," she said.

That possibility hadn't even occurred to me.

And so Jimmy Wildman settled down with us. His personal habits were far from nice. He ate hunched up over his plate, shoveling the food in in a hit-and-miss fashion. He spent much of the day in front of the television, watching cartoons for preference. His personal hygiene was appalling, but I never heard my mother try to do anything about this.

I began to think that Jimmy Wildman was not the sort of man a young girl ought to have around her in her impressionable years.

He used to go to pubs most evenings. Sometimes my mother would go with him. Sometimes—if they were driving out somewhere and there was little danger of my meeting anyone from school, or their

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parents, and being embarrassed—I would go, too. On nice evenings we would sit outside the pub, and sometimes Jimmy would get quite jolly and a group would gather around him, laughing. He would introduce himself to strangers by banging his chest and saying, "Me Wild Man."

I could have died, he was so common.

One of my father's reluctant and infrequent visits was promised for early October. One day on the stairs I happened to overhear my mother and Jimmy in the sitting room.

"Jennifer's dad's coming on Saturday. Best make yourself scarce."

"Why the hell should I? Are you supposed to live like a bloody nun, when he upped and left you?"

"He's the goose that lays the golden eggs. We don't want him making any trouble about Jennifer."

There was a pause and then Jimmy said: "I'll take off for the day."

I took that as a useful hint: the money coming in was for me, so it could be used to put pressure on my mother. On Saturday, when my father came to fetch me, he said he thought we'd go to the zoo. I made no objections, though I disapprove on principle of keeping animals in captivity. I thought it would be a good place to talk, so an hour or two later, when we were looking at a bored grizzly bear and it was looking back at us boring each other, I said:

"Mummy's got a new boy friend."

"Has she now?"

I looked to see whether he was anticipating saving money, but my father has a very noncommittal face, due to his not having very much in the way of interests or opinions.

"He's yucky. He's hulking and very working-class, and he's been in jail."

"Well, I wouldn't want to say anything against your mother," he said, preparing to, "but she never had much taste, and she can hardly pick and choose at her time of life."

Where, I wondered but did not say, did that leave him?

"He's got disgusting habits, and he doesn't even keep himself clean. He smells!"

"Hmmm."

I could have been talking about the family dog.

"It's not very nice for me, growing up with someone like that around."

"No, it can't be. But I don't see what I can do. Your mother is a free agent."

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"There's the money you send her."

"The money is for you. And it doesn't sound as if the boy friend is in the high-income bracket."

Well, at least that confirmed my suspicion, but it didn't get me much further forward. When he let me out of the car outside the semi I called home, he said:

"Keep me posted about your mother's boy friend."

Thank you for your concern, I muttered to myself as I went through the gate and up the path to the door.

Jimmy kept away until late that evening. When he came back, he was flushed with drink and was carrying a four-can pack of Export lager. I had noticed that my mother never seemed to give him any money for himself, but that after he'd been out in the evenings on his own he usually had cash to spare for the next day or two. I turned over in my mind what to make of this observation, but came to no conclusion. Since he always used the car—our car—I was unable to follow him to see what he was doing.

One day when I was talking to the headmistress about what I was to take next year, I suddenly told her about him. It came out almost without my intending it.

"There's a man living in our house now. My mum's boy friend. He's hulking and common—he just sits around all day eating and watching telly."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Forster, interested.

"I think he could be violent."

"Has there been any violence towards you or your mother?"

"Not towards me. I don't think there has yet against Mother, but I'm not sure. I'm afraid of him. He's not the sort of person should be around a growing girl."

"No, I can see that. But I'm not sure there's anything I can do."

She did, I later learned, ring my mother and make an appointment "to talk over Jennifer's future." My mother never turned up. Not that one could necessarily blame that on Jimmy. In the days before she met him she probably wouldn't have turned up for such a meeting, either.

"I wish you'd get rid of Jimmy," I said to my mother a week or so after that. "I don't like the way he keeps eyeing me. It's disgusting."

"Eyeing you?"

"Yes—you know, sexually."

"You don't know anything about it."

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"Yes, I do. I'm going to lock my door."

"Go ahead. I know you're making it up because I know Jimmy doesn't fancy young girls. He fancies older women, thank God. I see who he eyes off when we're out together."

She flounced out of the kitchen, bumping into the open door. She was very clumsy, my mother. I thought: well, that was another approach that didn't work. She was quite right. The women Jimmy looked at when we were out at pubs and places were all plump, maternal types. Pathetic, I called it.

The next day the knock my mother had taken by bumping into the door had come up into a nasty blue bruise. I was pleased. I was standing at the bus stop on my way to school when Mrs. Horrocks from next door came past.

"Hello, Jennifer. How's your mother? I haven't seen her for ages."

"She's all right. —Well, not really. She's got this nasty bruise."

"A bruise? How did she get that?"

"You know. That man."

"Man? The one that's stopping with you?"

"Her boy friend."

"Well! I thought he was a cousin or nephew or something!"

I stared at the ground, and Mrs. Horrocks went on her way, shaking her head. I congratulated myself that I hadn't even told her a lie, though I was quite willing to if necessary. I did later in the day when I went specially to see Miss Forster and tell her.

She also shook her head. "If only your mother had come to see me, dear. We could have talked it over. Perhaps *I* should go and pay a call on *her*."

She did, later that day. My mother called her an interfering old bag when I got home that afternoon, and Miss Forster told me the next day that my mother had insisted that she collided with a door.

"Such a silly story. I'm beginning to be quite worried about you, dear." She added: "If you should ever need a home, Jenny dear, you can always rely on me."

The next thing that happened was that the police came for Jimmy. They came on a Saturday when he was deeply absorbed in the Flintstones or Corky the Cat, and after a bit of talk in the living room they took him away. I suppose he was "helping the police with their enquiries," which I always thought was a very silly phrase: I couldn't see Jimmy as Dr. Watson. My mother said: "The bloody police. They

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always pick on past offenders." I shrugged and said: "Seems a sensible place to start." She got very ropey.

The annoying thing was that by late afternoon Jimmy was back and wanting to know what had happened to Corky the Cat. The police had hoped to pin a pilfering raid in Kettlesham onto him, but the night it had occurred he had been with my mother in Barstow, at the pub where they had met and where they were by now fairly well known. Right man, wrong job. I conceived a low opinion of the local police which I have had no reason to alter since.

I need hardly say that the arrival of the policemen and their going off with Jimmy had been observed by the whole neighborhood, most of them cleaning their cars or clearing up leaves on their front lawns at the time. I began to be showered with looks of pity when they passed me in the street.

It was now approaching Christmas. My mother had had no more accidents that showed, unfortunately: she was clumsy but not absolutely incapable physically. The thought of Christmas with Jimmy, and the endless diet of television pap aimed at people with a mental age of ten, was not pleasant. I said: "I think we should go away for Christmas."

It was typical of my mother that she never thought of the idea of going away for Christmas for herself, and typical, too, that once it came up it appealed to her immensely: no fuss of cooking, decorating the house, stocking up with goodies. The burden reduced, in fact, to buying something for me (I always told her what I wanted), and this year something for Jimmy (almost anything in the clothes line would be acceptable, since his wardrobe was an Adidas bag). My mother said uncertainly:

"But where do you *go*, if you go away for Christmas? What do people *do?*"

"They go to hotels. There's one in the paper tonight offering a three-day Christmas-away break, at Seccombe."

"It would be *nice*."

"A hundred and fifty pounds in all, children at half price."

"I suppose I could manage that."

"Jimmy would need some new clothes," I pointed out.

"Oh, that's all right. I was thinking of kitting him out for Christmas, anyway."

Jimmy didn't look particularly gratified or even interested and he didn't say what he was thinking of getting her: it depended, presumably, on what he could pick up.

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"I could ring them and book," I said.

I have a very adult voice and an excellent vocabulary. It was always best to do things like that myself, since if I left it to Mother it would probably not get done. After some thought, I booked us in as Mr. and Mrs. Wildman and Jennifer Burton (child). Child of a previous marriage, I impressed on my mother.

"I don't know why I should lie about being married to Jimmy," she complained. "Nobody cares these days."

"They would care at a hotel in Seccombe," I said, and added nastily, "It looks bad enough as it is."

That, as it turned out, was putting it mildly. The clientele at the Devonshire Arms at Seccombe were fiftyish or over, twin-set and pearls if they were women, tweeds and pipes if they were men. Middle-aged women with toy-boys were not part of their mental world. They gave the impression that they had spent their lives choking off unwanted familiarities, and it seemed as if the whole point for them of celebrating Christmas in a hotel was to show that they knew how to Keep Themselves to Themselves.

Jimmy in a suit and tie only meant that the temperature was nine below instead of ten below. Any communication there was occurred between the men in the bars, where it was established that the "marriage" of Jimmy and my mother was recent, and I was not his child. It was immediately assumed I was an illegitimate product of my mother's gay youth, and I was "poor deared" by the kindlier of the women there and pointedly ignored by the beastlier. Any attempts at jollity at our table (and Jimmy only tried two or three times) lowered the temperature in the room still further.

It didn't worry my mother. To care what other people think of you, you have first to notice. She ate the food, which was conventional but good, drank the odd glass of wine, leaving the rest of the bottle to Jimmy, and generally seemed to have quite a satisfactory time of it. They spent a lot of time in bed, but as there was television in each room they could well have been watching *The Sound of Music*.

I had announced from the beginning that I wanted to go to Hatherton Towers. That is the point about Seccombe. It is a very snooty little town, but the nearest stately home has been turned into an enormous leisure park and fun fair—a sort of Disneyland without the class. If my mother had known anything about me at all, she would have found it surprising that I should want to go anywhere

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as childish and vulgar as Hatherton Towers, but when I asked she just nodded. I needn't have bothered insisting, in fact: Jimmy was determined to go, anyway. It was aimed at his mental age.

We went on Boxing Day. It had been closed in the run-up to Christmas and on The Day itself, but on Boxing Day families start shaking themselves out of their overfed torpor and getting out and about. Normal families, I mean. My mother swore about the steep admission charges, but the man at the ticket office explained that the price covered all the amusements and sideshows. "The little girl will have a whale of a time," he said. I shot him a glance that should have shriveled him, but he'd already gone on to smarming over the next family.

Well, Hatherton Towers had all the forced jollity and unforced vulgarity that I had expected, but I made myself go on a few things and Jimmy capered around like a five-year-old, and would have gone on everything if there'd been time. I bided my time for an hour or so, until I saw what I wanted, and when I saw it I bided my time until the crowd moved in another direction, and then I pointed.

"I want to go on that."

That was a super-high slide, snaking its way down round a central tower.

"Great!" said Jimmy, rubbing his hands and dancing towards it.

"You go," said my mother. "There's no bloody lift. I'm not climbing that ladder."

"Come on," I said, pulling her. "I'm not going up there with him on my own."

Grumbling, cursing, she started up.

"Come *on*," shouted Jimmy down to us. "It's going to be a great slide down! You've no energy!"

"Too bloody right!" shouted my mother back. "I'm thirty-eight. I grew out of this sort of lark when I was fifteen."

The sound of their voices penetrated back to the odd family on the ground. It was the best I could do. I'd given up hope of organizing a public row. Their temperaments were too similar. The word "sluggardly" would describe it best.

Jimmy was already at the top when we reached it. There was a waist-high fence which offered adequate protection for children. Jimmy was rubbing his hands at the top of the chute. My mother looked over the railings. "Christ Almighty," she said (she was inclined to blaspheme). "All this bloody way up just to go down again."

A second later she was on the ground, spreadeagled out, with a

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crowd gathering round her. A second or two later, Jimmy arrived at the bottom of the chute to find her already dead. I meditated whether to go down on the slide, which was obviously the quickest way, but it would have given the impression of heartlessness; so I began screaming instead.

I must say I never expected Jimmy to be accused of murder. I had underestimated forensic science. My mother had fallen plumb downwards on her face, and there were marks on her back that could only have been caused by a hefty shove. The police had assumed it was an accident, but once the report came through they had no hesitation in arresting him, and the case was so straightforward it was quite swiftly brought to trial. I gave evidence that they'd had a bit of an argument on the way up and implied that this was par for the course. I said I'd seen nothing on the top platform because I'd been looking over the railing on the other side.

The Defense, a pushy young man supplied on Legal Aid, went in all directions in his unconvincing attempt to save Jimmy. I wasn't in court, of course, but I had all the gen passed on to me by my school friends. (Miss Forster tried to protect me by keeping the newspapers from me—I'd asked to go to her as soon as I knew my mother was dead—but of course in a school everything gets out.)

First the Defense tried to shake the forensic evidence, but the expert said there was no way it could have been an accident. Then they tried to argue that Jimmy had found an easy berth and there was no way he was going to ruin it. The young man pointed out that he was a criminal of the most petty: he had had two periods of probation, one involving community work (unsatisfactorily performed), and one three-month jail sentence, all for shoplifting and petty pilfering (so much for breaking-and-entering—Jimmy couldn't have summoned up the nerve to break-and-enter to save his life). Defense pointed out that he had never been involved in violence, and the police had to agree with this. The police, in fact, seemed quite to like Jimmy, but they pointed out that he was an immature individual, involved in a long-term relationship for the first time, and had acted on the spur of the moment. That was why they were willing to reduce the charge to manslaughter.

Defense then turned, gingerly, to me. I was young and resented my mother's new affair, and perhaps was afraid of her lover. Prosecuting counsel vigorously objected. If the emotions were felt at all, they would not have been a motive for murdering the mother, but

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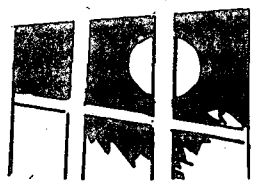
for murdering the lover. (Did they really think I was such a dumb-cluck as to commit a murder for which I would be the most likely suspect?) The forensic expert was recalled and expressed the view that it was most unlikely that a girl of twelve would have the necessary strength to inflict the blow that had sent my mother over the parapet (so much for experts).

I did wonder whether the police would do tests on the slide—whether they would find out that Jimmy could not have pushed my mother over and then arrived at the bottom a second or two later. But then, people's memories are not reliable where time is concerned, particularly at moments of crisis. And as I said, the local police are not all that bright.

So Jimmy was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to nine years. With remission for good conduct (and I can't see him having the nerve for anything else), he should be out in three or four years. I sometimes worry about this but, after all, by then I'll be at university, and what could he do if he found out where I was beyond accusing me? I just don't see him having the energy.

On the whole, living with Miss Forster has worked out very well. When my father comes on his twice-yearly visit, his face has an expression of relief on it, that someone could be found to take me on and relieve him of the responsibility. Miss Forster fusses a lot, is much too protective, but after my childhood this makes a nice change. It's true that recently there have been signs of something else that I certainly don't like—trying to get too close to me, touching me unnecessarily, that sort of thing. There's a teacher at school who's taken a big interest in me since my mother's death. Her family is grown up, so I could go and live with her. I wouldn't have to go to extremes with Miss Forster—just a few allegations to the police or the social worker who visits now and then would do the trick. I wouldn't think of doing anything more drastic. It would be unfortunate if people began to associate me with violent death.



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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Gertrude had seen Jackson Dodge glaring at the checkout girls in the supermarket here in Countdown, Florida. Had she been bigger than him, she would have attempted to swallow him in one gulp. Jackson Dodge was hardly one of the handsomest men in the world, but to the romantically starved Gertrude Pringle he was a combination of Adonis and Sting.

George Baxt's The Talking Pictures Murder Case, *due out shortly from St. Martin's, has been described as a cross between* Singin' in the Rain *and* The Day of the Locust . . .

PLAY IT BY FEAR

by GEORGE BAXT

He was thirty-seven years old, he was unmarried, and he was a doctor. He chose to hang up his shingle in Countdown, Florida, because statistics convinced him that its large majority of senior citizens would soon be flocking to him for placebos and panaceas. He rubbed the palms of his hands together in greedy anticipation of the wealth he would soon be acquiring.

His first friend in town was Abelard Goodfinger, a prosperous and respected undertaker. They lunched together in a cafeteria favored by the seniors because it featured an "all you can eat" buffet. For many of the oldsters, it was their one meal of the day. Dr. Jackson Dodge shook his head sadly as he watched most of them hoarding bread and rolls in the colorful shopping bags they carried in anticipation of storing up for a late-in-the-day snack.

"What a shame," said Dr. Dodge.

"Shame, hell," said Goodfinger, "they're all on their way out, and a good percentage of them are going to get their sendoff from me."

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He was wolfing down blackened maui maui. "Florida's one big mortuary. How's business?"

"Lousy."

"You been here three months now, Doc—what's the problem?"

"I'm new and I'm young. They don't trust me. They want treatment from someone their own age. I don't know how much longer I can stick it out here." He picked at his Mediterranean Tunafish Salad, so named because it contained a Greek black olive.

"Got yourself a girl yet?"

Dr. Dodge arched an eyebrow. "There are girls in Countdown? Young, available, willing girls? Where are they hiding? The only ones I've seen are at the supermarket checkout counters, threatening me to have a good day or else."

"I think I ought to introduce you to Gertrude Pringle."

"Who's she?"

"Nice girl. About your age."

"She's single?"

"Yup. They call her the single Pringle."

"What's her problem?"

"She's sort of shy and retiring."

"That could be a problem."

"She's also cooperative, or so I've been told."

"I see. What does she look like?"

"She's homelier than an opossum in the attic, but she's got a great figure."

"That's encouraging."

"Her uncle's the richest man in town."

The young doctor felt an interesting tingle in his spine. "Is she his favorite niece?"

The undertaker winked. "You got it."

"Does he have children of his own?"

"He's a bachelor. One of the meanest sons of bitches this side of the Everglades, but somehow Gertrude won him over. Her cousins have been losing weight worrying that Gertrude's going to inherit the whole shooting match."

"Maybe you should send me the cousins."

"You don't want to know them. They're a nasty lot. I suspect inbreeding." Fish sauce dribbled down his chin as he moved his chair to let an old woman maneuvering a walker get past him to the ladies' room. Goodfinger rubbed his chin with a paper napkin and then said, "Except there's Consuela."

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"What about Consuela?"

"She's the family beauty."

The doctor brightened. "Well, what about Consuela?"

"She's only fifteen."

"She's bound to mature."

"I don't think you can stand the wait. She's darn cute, though."

Darn cute and only fifteen, thought Jackson Dodge. I haven't had a girl who was darn cute and only fifteen since that weekend in Daytona Beach last month.

The undertaker was still talking. "Yup, I think you ought to meet Gertrude. She just might be right down your alley."

The doctor agreed with him. "I'd like to meet her. I appreciate your interest."

"What the hell, Jackson, we're men of the world, right? And besides, old Axel Pringle just might be in the market for a new doctor. The mean old cuss has hired and fired just about every one of your competition over the past ten years. Come on, let's go back to my office and phone Gertrude." He looked at his pocket watch. "And it's time to look in on Mrs. Canutt. I've got her on the draining table."

Axel Pringle's voice was shrill and rasping. "Who's that on the phone? Who you talking to? *Gert!* Who you talking to?"

Gertrude Pringle shouted from the little library adjoining her uncle's bedroom, "I'm talking to Abelard Goodfinger!"

"Hang up! I ain't ready for him yet! Heh heh!" He fell back on the pillow. "Ain't gonna use him, anyway. I'm gonna be cremated and I want my ashes thrown in my relatives' faces. Exceptin' you, Gert." Gertrude had entered the room and was a picture of depressing homeliness. "You're a good girl, Gert. You're the only good thing my rotten brother brought into this world."

Gertrude wrinkled her ugly nose coyly, which made her look like a wart hog in heat. "I do believe Mother had something to do with it, too."

"*That* mess? She shoulda been the victim of a mercy killing. What did Goodfinger want?"

Gertrude sat down on an oversized hassock and primly arranged her skirt. "He wants me to meet Jackson Dodge."

"Who's Jackson Dodge?"

"He's the new young doctor in town."

"Oh, yeah? How long's he been in town? How come I ain't heard of him afore?"

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"He's only been here three months or so."

"Oh, yeah? Where's he from?"

"From up North, I heard tell."

"Why didn't you tell me about him? It ain't like you to keep secrets from me."

"I don't know. I guess he just slipped my mind."

Liar. Gertrude had seen Jackson Dodge glaring at the checkout girls in the supermarket. Had she been bigger than him, she would have attempted to swallow him in one gulp. Jackson Dodge was hardly one of the handsomest men in the world, but to the romantically starved Gertrude Pringle he was a combination of Adonis and Sting.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes. At the supermarket."

"How'd you know who he was?"

Embarrassed, Gertrude cleared her throat. "I asked the girl who serves at the cookie counter. The one who fidgets and picks her nose. I don't buy our cookies there."

The old man's eyes narrowed. "You fancy him?"

"Oh, now, Uncle Axel!"

"Don't you oh-now-Uncle-Axel me. You're still a young woman and you got a young woman's sexual appetite. Why don't you invite him over?"

"I just did."

"I thought you said you was talking to the undertaker."

"Dr. Dodge was with Mr. Goodfinger. They had just eaten lunch at the cafeteria."

"Probably dining on human flesh. There's plenty of it around. I want to meet this here Jackson Dodge. You bring him up here when he comes around."

"Of course I will."

"When's he coming around?"

"Any minute now."

"That fast? I guess Goodfinger didn't describe you."

Across the street, in a decaying mansion hidden from the street by a wall of tattered palm trees, Gertrude's four monstrous cousins were finishing their dessert. Magwitch, the oldest of the four, asked the other three, "What do we do about Gertrude?"

His sister, Portia, a widow in her fifties, said with a shrug, "You're

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always asking that question, Magwitch, and you always get the same answer. How the hell do I know?"

Aramis, a man with an uncontrollable twitch in his right cheek, said with a whine, "She's gonna get it all. I jes' know it. Every damn nickel."

Fifteen-year-old Consuela of the gorgeous face and voluptuous body said as she twisted a golden curl with an index finger, "Well, I think she deserves it." She dodged the cupcake her mother Portia flung at her. "Well, she does. Nobody else in the family offered to help him when he got paralyzed from the waist down and became a hopeless invalid."

"For a pretty girl, you're awfully mean-spirited, Consuela," said her Uncle Magwitch.

Consuela went to the bar to pour herself a stiff gin. "I feel sorry for Gert, being as ugly as she is. I'll bet she's still a virgin."

"I'll bet you ain't," said her cousin Aramis.

"You should know." She downed the gin in one gulp and left the room.

"I repeat," said Magwitch, "what do we do about Gertrude?"

Dr. Jackson Dodge's heart stood still. Gertrude had opened the door for him. Her face was certainly a traffic stopper. He found his voice, although he was positive his vocal cords were paralyzed. "Miss Gertrude Pringle?"

"Why, yes, I am. Are you Dr. Dodge?"

"Please call me Jackson." Was that really himself speaking? He thought his voice sounded disembodied.

"Won't you come into the parlor—um—Jackson?"

In the parlor, they sat opposite each other and did their best to manufacture conversation. They made short shrift of the weather in two minutes, demolished the citizenry of Countdown in about four minutes, and by the seventh minute agreed the only town in Florida worse than Countdown was Orlando.

"Bring him up here!" shrieked Axel Pringle.

The doctor wondered if Gertrude had suddenly developed a disgusting red rash on her face or was merely blushing. "Who's shrieking?"

"That's my very wealthy Uncle Axel. He's an invalid."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Goodfinger told me."

"He's paralyzed from the waist down. Some prostitute he was keeping shot him in the spine because he wouldn't give her some

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of his shares in AT&T. As you can see, she was not one of those prostitutes with a heart of gold."

"Had she had a heart of gold, she would obviously have hocked it," Jackson sniggered.

"I'd better take you up to meet him," Gertrude said.

A few minutes later, Axel Pringle caught his first look at Jackson Dodge and liked what he saw. "So you're the new doctor in town, eh? How's business?"

"Pretty fair," lied Jackson.

"As bad as that, eh? Well, it takes time for the town to get used to you. What do you think of Gertrude?"

"Oh, Uncle, please!"

"You mind your tongue." Axel squinted at the doctor. "Well? What do you think of her?"

"I think she's positively charming," said Jackson, miraculously keeping a straight face.

"I'd like to see you two become—er—friends. Gertrude's a good girl. She's been looking after me for a long time. And—" Axel winked slyly at the doctor "—she's gonna get her reward one of these days."

"Gertrude," the doctor spoke her name warmly, "would you have dinner with me tonight?"

They had many dinners together, and several picnics, and Gertrude was soon head over heels in love with the doctor. With old Axel's permission, she invited their four relatives from across the street to dinner, which she cooked herself. It was almost edible.

Jackson found it difficult not to stare at the nubile Consuela most of the evening. Consuela batted her long eyelashes and often ran her tongue obscenely around her lips. (She would remind him of her brazen behavior two nights later when they trysted in the seedy sordid motel on the southern outskirts of town.) After dinner, the group took their coffee and ladyfingers with Axel in his bedroom. Axel said through a chuckle that was more a cackle, "How about our Gertie? Landing herself a catch like the doctor? Well, Doctor, I let Gertrude give this here obnoxious dinner party for one good reason of my own. Starting right now, Jackson Dodge, you are my official doctor."

Portia snorted. "When did you get rid of Doc Bonesore?"

"Yesterday. So this dinner is by way of celebration." He saw the sly smile on Gertrude's face. "This makes you happy, Gertie?"

"Very happy, Uncle. Jackson?"

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Jackson took a deep breath to steady his voice. "I am indeed honored, sir." He heard a slurp coming from the right and a quick glance told him he had also won for himself the impeccably constructed Consuela.

Countdown was soon buzzing with the news of Jackson Dodge replacing Dr. Bonesore. It also buzzed with the rumor that Dodge was thinking of making an honest woman of Gertrude, although how much more honest Gertrude could get was incalculable.

One day, while sharing an ice-cream cone in Countdown's municipal park, Jackson explained in a tired and sad voice to Gertrude, "Of course I want to marry you, dear, but my financial position is hopeless. I have exactly one patient—your uncle. The town resents me because old Bonesore got bounced. Gertrude, I hate to say this, but I may have to leave Countdown."

Gertrude went berserk. "You can't! You can't! You *mustn't!* You can't leave me—I'm *wild* about you!"

"Gertrude, please, my wrist—you're fracturing it."

"Jackson, Jackson my darling, my beloved. Don't you realize I'm going to be a very rich woman? Everyone knows I'm my uncle's sole heir. He can't live forever!"

"Oh, no? Aside from being paralyzed, he's healthy enough to live another ten years."

She said sadly, "He wouldn't do a thing like that, would he?"

Jackson nodded his head.

Gertrude spoke in a ghostly whisper. "I won't let you leave me, Jackson. I won't."

Even Axel Pringle was shocked by the sudden decline of his health. "It's that new stuff the doc has you feeding me," he insisted to Gertrude.

"Oh, don't be silly, Uncle. That's the tonic to increase your red blood corpuscles."

"I got enough red blood corpuscles." Axel was gasping for breath. "Gertrude—Gertrude—I don't want to die yet!"

"I don't want you to die yet, either, Uncle," she said, entwining two fingers of her right hand. "If it was possible, I'd like you to live forever."

Axel seemed not to have heard her. His eyes were closed and he was breathing with difficulty. When she left the room, he reached

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for the phone on the night table with an effort and dialed a familiar number.

Axel Pringle's funeral was a sellout, a real crowd-pleaser. At the crematorium, Gertrude sniffled into a lovely black handkerchief trimmed with white lace. At her side, Jackson held her hand, murmuring, "There, there." Abelard Goodfinger picked at his teeth with a platinum toothpick. Magwitch, Portia, and Aramis had mean thoughts to match the mean looks on their faces while Consuela's tongue ran its usual laps around her oval mouth. When the service was over, Aloysius Trueblood, Axel Pringle's lawyer, told the family he'd be reading the contents of Axel's will in the living room of his home at three that afternoon. Jackson patted Gertrude's hand.

At three, the family assembled to hear the reading of the will. Jackson Dodge's presence was, of course, by Gertrude's invitation, as he would soon be one of the family.

Said Lawyer Trueblood after cleaning his pince-nez with his gravy-stained tie, "Axel Pringle altered his will a few days before he died."

The sharp intakes of breath were Gertrude's and Jackson's. The other members of the family leaned forward like ferrets out for prey.

The lawyer smiled reassuringly at Gertrude. "Oh, don't you worry, Gertie, you still get it all."

Gertrude and Jackson exhaled.

"However, and you know how eccentric old Axel was—" Gertrude smiled warmly "—he's added a codicil. If you should die within one month of the reading of this will, the money is to be evenly divided among your four surviving relatives—"

His voice droned on, the subject being Axel's eccentricity, but Gertrude heard nothing. Her eyes darted from Magwitch to Portia and Aramis and she saw murder reflected in their faces. She saw Consuela wink at Jackson and Jackson winked back.

Axel had guessed at what Gertrude and Jackson were up to, slowly poisoning him for the money. She heard someone giggle. Who?

If *I* should die within one month of the reading of this will—

The lawyer stopped reading. "What's wrong, Gertrude? What's wrong—she's gone all pale. She's going to faint—somebody catch her! Doctor Dodge, quick, help her!"

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DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies Officer Hank McGraw,
The finest policeman you ever saw
Except for a single fatal flaw.
He married a lady—a cop named Jenny—
As pretty and bright as a brand-new penny—
And lived with her in marital grace
(While keeping the criminals in their place)
For two great years. As the third one neared,
The fatal flaw in McGraw appeared.
At first there was one, and then there were many
Occasions when Hank wasn't true to Jenny—
For Hank was attracted to any beauty
He happened to meet in the line of duty.
And Jenny, poor girl, didn't have a suspicion
That her husband was prone to this straying condition
Till by sheer chance she witnessed a scene
Twixt Hank and a meter maid named Jean,
Who were using his car to enjoy the bliss
Of a surreptitious back-seat kiss.
Jenny stood staring, amazed, dumfounded—
Her pulses were racing, her temples pounded—
And the strongest emotion she felt just then
Was a raging bitter disgust with men,
Especially Hank, whom she'd loved and trusted
Only to have her heart thus busted.
So she jerked the door of his prowl car wide
And drew the revolver at her side,
And pointed it with a steady hand
At Hank's pituitary gland.
"Don't shoot me, darling!" cried Hank, aghast,
"I swear this affair will be my last!
"Have mercy, dear! Have mercy, Jenny!"
But outraged Jenny hadn't any.

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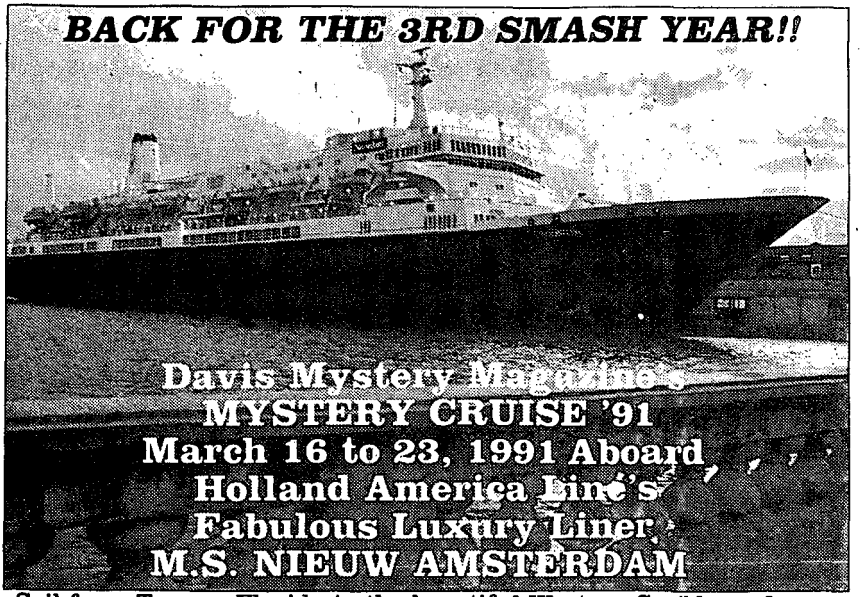

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a *NEW* short story by

FAYE KELLERMAN

Deirdre was describing the circumstances leading to the absence of her daily help. "Last week I was cleaning out my closets," she said. "Martina was helping me. I gave her a pile of old clothes to take home. I remember it because I asked her how in the world she'd be able to carry it all on the bus. She just laughed. And, oh, how she thanked me. Such a sweet girl—twelve years she worked for me."

Our first story from Faye Kellerman, whose most recent novel, Milk and Honey, *was published this year by William Morrow . . .*

DISCARDS

by FAYE KELLERMAN

Because he'd hung around long enough, Malibu Mike wasn't considered a bum but a fixture. All of us locals had known him, had accustomed ourselves to his stale smell, his impromptu orations and wild hand gesticulations. Malibu preaching from his spot—a bus bench next to a garbage bin, perfect for foraging. A man that weatherbeaten, it had been hard to assign him an age, but the police had estimated he'd been between seventy and ninety when he died—a decent stay on the planet.

Originally, they'd thought that Malibu had died from exposure. The winter had been a chilly one, a new Arctic front eating through the god-awful myth that Southern California was bathed in continual sunshine. Winds churned the tides grey-green and charcoal clouds blanketed the shoreline. The night before last had been cruel. But Malibu had been protected under layers and layers of clothing—a barrier that kept his body insulated from the low of forty degrees.

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Malibu had dressed in layers even when the mercury grazed the hundred-degree mark. That fact was driven home when the obituary in the *Malibu Crier* announced his weight as one-twenty-six. I'd always thought of him as chunky, but now I realized it had been the clothes.

I put down the newspaper and turned up the knob on my kerosene heater. Rubbing my hands together, I looked out the window of my trailer. Although it was grey, rain wasn't part of the forecast and that was good—my roof was still pocked with leaks that I was planning to fix today. But then the phone rang.

I didn't recognize the woman's voice on the other end, but she must have heard about me from someone I knew a long time ago. She asked for Detective Darling.

"Former Detective," I corrected her. "This is Andrea Darling. Who am I talking to?"

A throat cleared. She sounded in the range of middle-aged to elderly. "Well, you don't know me personally. I'm a friend of Greta Berstat."

She paused, allowing me to acknowledge recognition. She was going to wait a long time. "Greta Berstat," she repeated. "You were the detective on her burglary? You found the men who had taken her sterling flatware and the candlesticks and the tea set?"

The bell went off and I remembered Greta Berstat. When I'd been with LAPD, my primary detail was Grand Theft Auto. Greta's case had come my way during a brief rotation through Burglary.

"Greta gave you my phone number?" I inquired.

"Not exactly," the woman explained. "You see, I'm a local resident and I found your name in the Malibu Directory—the one put out by the Chamber of Commerce. You were listed under Investigation, right between Interior Design and Jewelers."

I laughed to myself. "What can I do for you, Ms.—?"

"Mrs. Pollack," the woman answered. "Deirdre Pollack. Greta was over at my house when I was looking through the phone book. When she saw your name, my-oh-my did she sing your praises, Detective Darling."

I didn't correct her this time. "Glad to have made a fan. How can I help you, Mrs. Pollack?"

"Deirdre, please."

"Deirdre it is. What's up?"

Deirdre hemmed and hawed. Finally she said, "Well, I have a little bit of a problem."

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I said, "Does this problem have a story behind it?"

"I'm afraid it does."

"Perhaps it would be best if we met in person."

"Yes, perhaps it would be best."

"Give me your address," I said. "If you're local, I can probably make it down within the hour."

"An hour?" Deirdre said. "Well, that would be simply lovely!"

From Deirdre's living room, I had a one-eighty-degree view of the coastline. The tides ripped relentlessly away at the rocks ninety feet below. You could hear the surf even this far up, the steady whoosh of water advancing and retreating. Deirdre's estate took up three landscaped acres, but the house, instead of being centered on the property, had been perched on the edge of the bluff. She'd furnished the place warmly—plants and overstuffed chairs and lots of maritime knickknacks.

I settled into a chintz wingchair. Deirdre insisted on making me a cup of coffee, and while she did I took a moment to observe her.

She must have been in her late seventies, her face scored with hundreds of wrinkles. She was short, with a loose turkey wattle under her chin. Her cheeks were heavily rouged, her thin lips painted bright red. She had flaming red hair and false eyelashes that hooded blue eyes turned milky from cataracts. She had a tentative manner, yet her voice was firm and pleasant. Her smile seemed genuine even if her teeth weren't. She wore a pink suit, a white blouse, and orthopedic shoes.

"You're a lot younger than I expected," Deirdre said, handing me a china cup.

I smiled. I'm thirty-eight, but to a woman Deirdre's age thirty-eight still could be younger than expected.

"Are you married, Detective?" Deirdre asked, positioning herself opposite me on a loveseat.

"Not at the moment." I smiled.

"I was married for forty-seven years." She sighed. "Mr. Pollack passed away six years ago. I miss him."

"I'm sure you do." I put my cup down. "Do you have children?"

"Two. A boy and a girl. Both are doing well—they visit often."

"That's good," I said. "So you live by yourself."

"Well, yes and no," she answered. "I sleep here alone, but I have daily help—one woman for weekdays, another for weekends."

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I looked around the house. We seemed to be alone and it was ten o'clock Tuesday morning. "Your help didn't show up today?"

"That's the problem I wanted to tell you about."

I took out my notebook and pen.

"Well, the story involves my weekday housekeeper, Martina Cruz."

I wrote down the name.

"Martina's worked for me for twelve years," Deirdre said. "I've become quite dependent on her. Not just to give me pills and clean the house. We've become good friends. Twelve years is a long time."

I agreed.

Deirdre went on. "Martina lives far away from Malibu, far away from the house. But she's never missed a day in all these years without calling me first—she's very responsible. I respect her and trust her: that's why I'm puzzled. Even though Greta thinks I'm being naive. Maybe I *am* being naive, but I'd rather think better of people than be cynical."

"Do you think something's happened to her?"

"I'm not sure." Deirdre bit her lip. "I'll tell you what's happened and maybe you can offer a suggestion."

I told her to take her time.

Deirdre said, "Well, like many old women I've acquired things over the years. I tell my children to take whatever they want, but there are all kinds of things they don't want—old flowerpots and cookware, out-of-date clothing. So if I find something I no longer need, I usually give it to Martina.

"Last week I was cleaning out my closets. Martina was helping me." She sighed. "I gave her a pile of old clothes to take home. I remember it because I asked her how in the world she'd be able to carry it all on the bus. She just laughed. And, oh, how she thanked me. Such a sweet girl—twelve years she worked for me."

I nodded, waited.

"I feel so silly about this," Deirdre said. "One of the robes I gave her—it was Mr. Pollack's old robe, actually. I threw out most of his things after he died—it was hard for me to look at them. I couldn't imagine why I'd kept his old robe."

She looked down at her lap. "Not more than fifteen minutes after Martina left, I realized why I hadn't given the robe away. I kept my diamond ring in one of the pockets. I have three different diamond rings—two of which I keep in a vault. But it's ridiculous to have rings and keep them in a vault. So this one—the smallest of the

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three—I kept at home, in the left pocket of Mr. Pollack's robe. I hadn't worn it in ages and I guess it simply slipped my mind.

"I waited until Martina arrived home and phoned her just as she walked through the door. I told her what I'd done and she looked in the pockets of the robe and announced she had the ring. I was not only relieved that nothing had happened to it but delighted by Martina's honesty. She said she'd return the ring to me on Monday. I realize now that I should have called my son and asked him to pick it up at that moment, but I didn't want to insult her."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Deirdre said, reaching across for my hand. "You don't think I'm foolish for trusting someone who has worked for me for twelve years?"

Wonderfully foolish. "You didn't want to insult her," I reminded her.

"Exactly," Deirdre answered. "Well, it's now Tuesday. I still don't have my diamond and I can't reach Martina."

"Is her phone disconnected?"

"No. It just rings and rings and no one answers it."

"Why don't you send your son down now?"

"Because—" She sighed. "Because I don't want him to think of his mother as an old fool. Would you go there for me? I'll pay you for your time, of course."

I shrugged. "Sure." I told her my rates, which were fine with her, and she handed me a piece of paper with Martina's name, address, and phone number. I didn't know the exact location of the house but I knew the area. "If it looks like Martina took off with the ring," I said, "would you like me to inform the police for you?"

"No!" she said adamantly.

"Why not?" I asked her.

"Even if she took the ring, I wouldn't want to see her in jail. We have too many years together for me to do that."

"You can be my boss any time," I told her, heading for the door.

"Why?" she said. "Do you do housekeeping, too?"

I informed her that I was a terrible housekeeper, leaving her looking both grateful and confused.

Martina Cruz lived on Highland Avenue south of Washington—a street lined by small houses tattooed with graffiti. The address on the paper was a wood-sided white bungalow with a tarpaper roof. The front lawn, mowed but devoid of shrubs, was bisected by a

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cracked red-plaster walkway. There was a two-step hop onto a porch, whose decking was wet and rotted. The screen door was closed, but a head-sized hole had been cut through the mesh. I knocked through the hole, but no one answered. I turned the knob and, to my surprise, the door yielded, screen and all.

I called out a hello, and when no one answered walked into the living room—an eight-by-ten rectangle filled with hand-me-down furnishings. The sofa fabric, once gold, had faded to dull mustard. Two mismatched chairs were positioned opposite it. There was a scarred dining table off the living room, its centerpiece a black-and-white TV with rabbit ears. Encircling the table were six folding chairs. The kitchen was tiny, but the counters were clean, the food in the refrigerator still fresh. The trash, brimming over with Corona beer bottles, hadn't been taken out in a while.

I went inside the sole bedroom. A full-sized mattress lay on the floor. There were no closets. Clothing was neatly arranged in boxes—some filled with little-girl garments, others stuffed with adult apparel. I quickly sifted through it, trying to find Mr. Pollack's robe.

I didn't find it—no surprise. Picking up a corner of the mattress, I peered underneath but didn't see anything. I poked around a little longer, then checked out the back yard—a dirt lot with a rusted swing-set and some deflated rubber balls.

Back around to the front I decided to question the neighbors. The house on the immediate left was occupied by a diminutive thick-set Latina matron. She was dressed in a floral print muumuu and her hair was tied into a bun. I asked her if she'd seen Martina lately and she pretended not to understand me. My Spanish, though far from perfect, was understandable, so it seemed as if we had a little communication gap. Nothing that couldn't be overcome by a ten-dollar bill.

After I gave her the money, she informed me her name was Alicia and she hadn't seen Martina, Martina's husband, or their two little girls for a few days. But the lights had been on last night, loud music booming out of the windows.

"Does Martina have any relatives?" I asked Alicia in Spanish.

Martina had a sister, but Alicia didn't know where she lived. Probing further, I found out the sister's name—Yolanda Flores. And I also learned that the little girls went to a parochial school run by the Iglesia Evangelica near Western Avenue. I knew the church she was talking about.

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Most people think of Hispanics as always being Catholic. But I knew from past work that Evangelical Christianity had taken a strong foothold in Central and South America. Maybe I could locate Martina or the sister, Yolanda, through the church directory.

The Pentecostal Church of Christ sat on a quiet avenue—an aqua-blue stucco building that looked more like an apartment complex than a house of worship. About twenty-five primary-grade children were playing in an outdoor parking lot, the perimeter defined by a cyclone fence. The kids wore green-and-red uniforms and looked like moving Christmas-tree ornaments.

I went through the gate, dodging the racing children, and walked into the main sanctuary. The chapel wasn't large but the high ceiling made it feel spacious. There were three distinct seating areas—the Pentecostal triad: married women on the right, married men on the left, and mixed young singles in the middle.

The pews faced a stage which held a thronelike chair upholstered in red velvet. In front of the throne was a lectern, sandwiched between two giant urns sprouting plastic flowers. Off to the side were several electric guitars and a drum set, the name *Revelacion* taped onto the bass drum.

I heard footsteps from behind and turned around.

The man looked to be in his early thirties, with thick, dark straight hair and bright-green eyes. His face held a hint of Aztec warrior—broad nose, strong cheekbones and chin. Dressed in casual clothing, he was tall and muscular and I was acutely aware of his male presence. I asked him where I might find the pastor and was surprised when he announced he was the very person.

I stated my business and his eyes never left mine as I spoke. When I finished, he stared at me for a long time before telling me his name—Pastor Alfredo Gomez. His English was unaccented.

"Martina's a good girl," he said. "She would never take anything that didn't belong to her. Some unrelated problem probably came up. I'm sure everything will work out and your *patrona* will get her ring back."

"What kind of unrelated problem?" I asked him.

The pastor shrugged.

"An immigration problem?" I probed.

Another shrug.

"You don't seem very concerned by her disappearance."

He gave me a cryptic smile.

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"Can you tell me one thing?" I asked. "Are her children safe?"

"I believe they're in school now," Gomez said.

"Oh." I brightened. "Did Martina bring them in?"

"No." He frowned. "No, she didn't. Her sister brought them in today. But that's not unusual."

"You haven't seen Martina today?"

Gomez shook his head. I thought he was telling me the truth, but maybe he wasn't. Maybe the woman was hiding from the INS. Still, after twelve years you'd think she'd have applied for amnesty. And then there was that alternative—that she had taken the ring and was hiding out somewhere.

"Do you have Martina's husband's work number?" I asked him. "I'd like to talk with him."

"Jose works construction," Gomez said. "I have no idea what crew he's on or where he is."

"What about Martina's sister, Yolanda Flores? Do you have her phone number?"

The pastor hesitated.

"I'm not from the INS." I fished around inside my wallet and came up with my private investigator's license.

He glanced at it. "This doesn't mean anything."

"Yeah, that's true." I put my I.D. back in my purse. "Look, Pastor, my client is really worried about Martina. She doesn't give a hoot about the ring. She specifically told me not to call the police even if Martina did take the ring."

Gomez stiffened and said, "Martina wouldn't do that."

"Okay. Then help us both out. Martina might be in some real trouble. Maybe her sister knows something."

Silently, Gomez weighed the pros and cons of trusting me. After a while he told me to wait a moment, then he came back with Yolanda's work number.

"You won't regret this," I assured him, taking a final gander at those beautiful green eyes before I slipped out the door.

I found a pay booth around the corner, slipped a quarter in the slot, and waited. An accented voice whispered hello.

Using my workable Spanish, I asked for Yolanda Flores. Speaking English, the woman informed me she was Yolanda. In the background, I heard the wail of a baby.

"I'm sorry if this is a bad time," I apologized. "I'm looking for your sister."

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There was a long pause at the other end of the line.

Quickly, I said, "I'm not from *Immigracion*. I was hired by Mrs. Deirdre Pollack to find Martina and was given your work number by Pastor Gomez. Martina hasn't shown up for work in two days and Mrs. Pollack is worried about her."

More silence. If I hadn't heard the same baby crying, I would have thought she'd hung up the phone.

"You work for Missy Deirdre?" Yolanda asked.

"Yes," I said. "She's very worried about your sister. Martina hasn't shown up for work. Is your sister okay?"

Yolanda's voice cracked. "Ees no good. Monday *en la tarde,* Martina husband call me. He tell me she don' work for Missy Deirdre and she have new job. He tell me to pick up her girls 'cause Martina work late. So I pick up the girls from the school and take them with me. Later I try to call her she's not home. I call and call but no one answers. I don' talk to Jose, I don' talk to no one. I take the girls to school this morning. Then Jose, he call me again."

"When?"

"About two hour. He ask me to take girls. I say yes, but where is Martina? He tell me she has to sleep in the house where she work. I don' believe him."

It was my turn not to answer right away. Yolanda must have been bouncing the baby or something because the squalling had stopped.

"You took the children yesterday?" I asked.

"I take her children, yes. I no mind takin' the kids but I want to talk to Martina. And Jose—he don' give me the new work number. I call Martina's house, no one answer. I goin' to call Missy Deirdre and ask if Martina don' work there no more. *Ahorita,* you tell me Missy Deirdre call *you*. I—scared."

"Yolanda, where can I find Jose?"

"He works *construcion*—I don' know where. Mebbe he goes home after work and don' answer the phone. You can go to Martina's house tonight?"

"Yes, I'll do that," I said. "I'll give you my phone number, you give me yours. If you find out anything, call me. If I find out something, I'll call you. Okay?"

"Okay."

We exchanged numbers, then said goodbye. My next call was to Deirdre Pollack. I told her about my conversation with Yolanda. Deirdre was sure that Martina hadn't taken a new job—first of all

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she would never just leave Deirdre flat and secondly she would never leave her children to work as a sleep-in housekeeper.

I wasn't so sure. Maybe Martina had fled with the ring and was lying low in some private home. But I kept my thoughts private and told Deirdre of my intention to check out Martina's house tonight. She told me to be careful. I thanked her and said I'd watch my step.

At night, Martina's neighborhood was the mean streets, the sidewalks supporting pimps and prostitutes, pushers and buyers. Every half hour or so, the homeboys cruised by in souped-up lowriders, their ghettoblasters pumping out body-rattling bass vibrations. I was glad I had my Colt .38 with me, but I wished it were a Browning pump.

I sat in the truck waiting for some sign of life at Martina's place. My patience was rewarded two hours later. A Ford pickup parked in front of the frame house and out came four dark-complexioned men dressed nearly identically: jeans, dark windbreakers zipped up to the neck, and hats. Three of them wore ratty baseball caps, the biggest and fattest wore a bright white painter's cap. Big-and-Fat was shouting and singing. I couldn't understand his Spanish—his speech was too rapid for my ear—but the words I could pick up seemed slurred. The other three were carrying six-packs of beer. From the way they were acting the six-packs weren't their first of the evening.

They went inside. I slipped my gun into my purse, got out of the truck, walked up to the door, and knocked. My luck: Big-and-Fat answered.

Up close, he was nutmeg brown with fleshy cheeks and thick lips. His teeth were rotten and he smelled of sweat and beer.

"I'm looking for Martina Cruz," I said in Spanish.

He stared at me—at my Anglo face. He told me in English that she wasn't home.

"Can I speak to Jose?"

"He's no home, too."

"I saw him come in." It was an educated guess. Maybe one of the four men was Jose.

Big-and-Fat stared at me, then broke into a contemptuous grin. "I say he no home."

I heard Spanish in the background, a male voice calling out the name Jose. I peered past Big-and-Fat's shoulders, but he stepped

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forward, making me back up. His expression was hostile and I always make it a point not to provoke drunk men who outweigh me.

"I'm going," I announced with a smile.

"Pasqual." A thinner version of Big-and-Fat stepped out onto the porch and addressed him. "Pasqual, *que pasa?*"

"I'm looking for Jose Cruz," I said. "I've been hired to look for Mart—"

The thinner man blanched.

"Go away!" Pasqual thundered. "Go or I kill you!"

The morning paper stated that Malibu Mike, having expired from natural causes, was still in deep-freeze, waiting for a relative to claim his body. He'd died buried under tiers of clothing, his feet wrapped in three pairs of socks stuffed into mismatched size 12 shoes. Two pairs of gloves had covered his hands and three scarves had been around his neck. A Dodgers cap was perched atop the ski hat that cradled his head. In all those layers, there wasn't one single piece of I.D. to let us know who he really was.

After all these years, I thought he deserved a decent burial and I wasn't the only one who felt that way. The locals were taking up a collection to have him cremated. Maybe a small service, too—a few words of remembrance, then his ashes would be mixed with the tides.

I thought Malibu might have liked that. I took a twenty from my wallet and began to search the trailer for a clean envelope and a stamp. I found both and was addressing the envelope when Yolanda Flores called me.

"Dey find her," she said, choking back sobs. "She *dead*. The police find her in a trash can. She beat to death. Es *horrible!*"

"Yolanda, I'm so sorry." I felt sick. "I wish I could do something for you."

"You wan' do somethin' for me?" Yolanda said. "You find out what happen to my sister."

Generally, I like to be paid for my services, but my mind flashed to little dresses in cardboard boxes. I knew what it was like to live without a mother. Besides, I was still fuming over last night's encounter with Pasqual.

"I'll look into it for you," I promised.

There was a silence across the line.

"Yolanda?"

"I still here," she said. "I—surprise you help me."

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"No problem."

"Thank you." She started to cry. "Thank you very much. I pay you."

"Forget it."

"No, I work for you on weekends—"

"Yolanda, I live in a trailer and couldn't find anything if you cleaned up my place. Forget about paying me. Let's get back to your sister. Tell me about Jose. Did Martina and he get along?"

There was another long silence. Yolanda finally said, "Jose no good. He and his brothers."

"Is Pasqual one of Jose's brothers?"

"How you know?"

I told her about my visit with Pasqual the night before, about his threat. "Has he ever killed anyone?"

"I don' know. He drink and fight. I don' know if he kill anyone when he drunk."

"Did you ever see Pasqual beating Martina?"

"No," Yolanda said. "I never see that."

"What about Jose?"

Another moment of silence.

Yolanda said, "He slap her maybe one or two time. I tell her to leave him, but she say no 'cause of the girls."

"Do you think Jose could kill Martina?"

Yolanda said, "He slap her when he drink, but I don' think he would kill her to kill her."

"He wouldn't do it on purpose."

"Essackly."

"Yolanda, would he kill her for money?"

"No," she said firmly. "He Evangelico. A bad Evangelico, but not *el diablo.*"

"He wouldn't do it for *lots* of money?"

"No, he don' kill her for money."

I said, "What about Pasqual?"

"I don' think so."

"Martina have any *enemigos?*"

"No!" Yolanda said. "No one want to hurt her. She like sugar. Es so *terrible!*"

She began to cry. I didn't want to question her any more over the phone. A face-to-face meeting would be better. I asked her when the funeral service was.

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"Tonight. *En la iglesia a la ocho.* After the *culto funeral,* we go to *cementerio.* You wan' come?"

"Yes, I think that might be best." I told her I knew the address of the church and would be there at eight o'clock sharp.

I was unnerved by what I had to do next: break the bad news to Deirdre Pollack. But she took it relatively well, never even asked about the ring. When I told her I'd volunteered to look into Martina's death, she offered to pay me. I told her that wasn't necessary, but when she insisted I didn't refuse.

I got to the church by eight, then realized I didn't know Yolanda from Adam. But she picked me out in a snap. Not a plethora of five foot eight, blonde, blue-eyed El Salvadoran women.

Yolanda was petite, barely five feet and maybe ninety pounds tops. She had yards of long brown hair—Evangelical women didn't cut their tresses—and big brown eyes moist with tears. She took my hand, squeezed it tightly, and thanked me for coming.

The church was filled to capacity, the masses adding warmth to the unheated chapel. In front of the platform was a table laden with broth, hot chocolate, and plates of bread. Yolanda asked me if I wanted anything to eat and I declined.

We sat in the first row of the married women's section. I glanced at the men's area and noticed Pasqual with his cronies. I asked Yolanda to point out Jose. He was the man who had come to the door after Pasqual. The other two men were also his brothers. Jose's eyes were swollen and bright red. From crying or post-alcohol intoxication?

I studied him further. He wore an ill-fitting black suit and his dark hair was slicked back with grease. All the brothers wore dark suits. Jose looked nervous but the others seemed almost jocular—until Pasqual caught me staring. His expression immediately darkened, his eyes bearing down on me. I felt needles down my spine when he started to his feet, but luckily the service began and he sank back into his seat.

Pastor Gomez came to the dais and spoke about what a wonderful wife and mother Martina had been. As he talked, the women around me began to let out soft, muted sobs.

Afterward, the pastor gave the congregation directions to the cemetery. Pasqual hadn't forgotten my presence, but I made a beeline for the pastor, managing to snare him before Pasqual could get to me.

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The pastor led me to a corner.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"I wish I knew."

"Do the police—"

"The police!" His green eyes flashed. "They don't care about a dead Hispanic girl! One less flea in their country. I was wearing my work clothes when I got the call this morning. I'd been doing some plumbing and I guess they thought I was a wetback who didn't understand English. They joked about her. They said it was a shame that such a body would go to waste."

I couldn't speak for a while. "That stinks."

"Yes." Gomez shook his head. "So you see, I don't expect much from the police."

"I'm looking into her death."

Gomez stared at me. "Who's paying you to do it?"

"Not Yolanda," I said.

"Martina's *patrona*. She wants her ring."

"I think she wants justice for Martina."

The pastor blushed from embarrassment.

"I would have done it *gratis*. I have some suspicions." I filled him in on my encounter with Pasqual.

Gomez thought a moment. "Pasqual drinks even though the church forbids alcohol. But he's not a bad person. Maybe you made him feel threatened."

"Maybe I did."

"I'll talk to him," Gomez said. "Calm him down. But I don't think you should come to the *cementerio* with us. Now is not the time for accusations."

I agreed.

Then he excused himself as another parishioner approached him. I met up with Yolanda and explained my decision not to go to the cemetery. She understood.

We walked out into the school yard, into a cold misty night. Jose and his brothers had already taken off their ties and replaced their suit jackets with warmer windbreakers. Pasqual took a deep swig from a bottle inside a paper bag, then passed the bag to one of his brothers.

"Look at them," Yolanda said with disgust. "They no even wait till after the funeral. They nothing but *cholos*. Es terrible!"

I observed the brothers. Something was bothering me and it took a while before it came to me. Three of them, including Jose, were

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wearing old baseball caps. Pasqual alone wore a painter's cap. I don't know why I found that significant. Then I remembered my first conversation with Yolanda and I decided I'd better put in a call to the bus company.

From behind me came a gentle tap on the shoulder. I turned around.

Pastor Gomez said, "Thank you for coming, Ms. Darling."

I nodded. "I'm sorry I never met Martina. From what I've heard, she seemed to be a very good woman."

"She was." Gomez shook my hand. "I appreciate your help and I wish you peace."

Then he turned and walked away. I'd probably never see him again and I felt a little bad about that.

I tailed Jose the next morning. He and his brothers were part of a crew framing a house in the Hollywood hills. I kept watch from a quarter block away, my truck partly hidden by the overhanging boughs of a eucalyptus. I was trying to figure out how to get Jose alone when I got a big break. The roach wagon pulled in and Jose was elected by his brothers to pick up lunch.

I got out of the truck, intercepted him as he was returning with an armful of burritos, and stuck my .38 in his side with the warning that if he said a word I'd pull the trigger. My Spanish must have been clear because he was as mute as Dopey.

After I got him into the cabin of the truck, I took the gun out of his ribs and held it in my lap, still aimed at him.

I said, "What happened to Martina?"

"I don' know."

"You're lying," I said. "You killed her."

"I don' kill her!" Jose was shaking hard. "*Yo juro!* I don' kill her!"

"Who did?"

"I don' know!"

"You killed her for the ring, didn't you, Jose?" He shrank back in the seat. "Martina would never tell you she had the ring: she knew you'd take it from her. But you must have found out. You asked her about the ring and she denied having it, right?"

Jose didn't answer.

I repeated the accusation in Espanol, but he still didn't respond.

"You didn't know what to do, so you waited and waited and finally, on Monday morning, you told your brothers about the ring. But by that time Martina and the ring had already taken the bus to work."

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"All we wan' do is talk to her!" Jose said. "Nothin' was suppose to happen."

"What wasn't supposed to happen?"

Jose opened his mouth, then shut it again.

I continued. "Pasqual has a truck—a Ford pickup." I read him the license number. "You and your brothers decided to meet up with her. A truck can go a lot faster than a bus. When the bus made a stop, two of you got on it and made Martina get off."

Jose shook his head.

"I called the bus company," I told him. "The driver remembered you and your brother—two men making this woman carrying a big bag get off at the stop behind the big garbage bin. The driver asked her if she was okay, but Martina didn't want to get you in trouble and said everything was fine. But everything wasn't fine, was it?"

Tears welled up in Jose's eyes.

"You tried to force her into Pasqual's truck, but she fought."

Jose remained mute.

"But you did finally get her into the truck," I said. "Only you forgot something. When she fought, she must have knocked off Pasqual's Dodgers cap. He didn't know it was gone until later, did he?"

Jose jerked his head up. "How you know?"

"How do I know? I *have* that cap, Jose." Another educated guess. "Now, why don't you tell me what happened?" I gestured with the gun to remind him of it.

"It was *assident*. Pasqual no mean to hurt her bad. Just get her to talk. She no have ring when we take her off the bus."

"Not in her bag?"

"She no have bag, just her handbag—and it not there. She tell us she left ring at home. So we took her home, but she don' fin' the ring. That make me mad. I *saw* her with ring. No good for a wife to lie to husband." His eyes filled with rage.

"So you killed her," I said.

"No—I tol' you. Pasqual did it. It was assident!"

Just then the driver's door jerked open and the gun was knocked out of my hand. Pasqual dragged me out of the truck and down to the ground, his face looming over me, his complexion florid and furious. He drew back his fist and aimed it at my jaw.

I rolled my head to one side and his hand hit the ground. He yelled, but not as loud as Jose did shouting at him to stop. Then I heard the click of the trigger. Pasqual heard it, too, and released

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me immediately. By now, some people had run up and were shouting, too. My gun in his hand, Jose aimed it at Pasqual.

"You kill Martina! Now I'm going to kill you!" he cried.

Pasqual looked genuinely confused. He spoke in Spanish. "*You* killed her! You beat her to death when we couldn't find the ring!"

Jose looked at me, his expression saying: do you believe this? Something in my expression must have told him I did. I told him to put the gun down, but he turned his back to me and kept the gun on Pasqual. "You lie. You get drunk, you kill Martina!"

In Spanish, Pasqual said, "I tried to *stop* you, you—"

"You *lie!*" Jose said. And then he pulled the trigger.

I charged him before he could squeeze another bullet out of the chamber, but the damage had been done. Pasqual was already dead when the sirens pulled up.

The two other brothers backed Jose's story. They'd come to confront Martina about the ring. She told them she had left it at home. But when they returned to the house and the ring wasn't around, Pasqual, in a drunken rage, beat Martina to death and dumped her body in the trash.

Jose will be charged with second-degree murder for Pasqual and maybe a good lawyer will be able to bargain it down to manslaughter. But I remembered the murderous look in Jose's eyes after he'd told me Martina had lied to him. If I were the prosecutor, I'd be going after Jose with charges of manslaughter on Martina and murder one on Pasqual. But that's not how the system works. Anyway, my verdict—right or wrong—wouldn't bring Martina back to life.

I called Mrs. Pollack after it was over. Through her tears, she wished she'd never remembered the ring. It wasn't her fault, but she still felt responsible.

There was a small consolation. I was pretty sure I knew where the ring was.

I'm not too bad at guesses—like the one about Pasqual losing his hat in a struggle. That simple image of the brothers at the church—three with beat-up Dodgers caps, the fourth wearing a new painter's cap. Something off-kilter.

So my hunch had been correct. Pasqual had once owned a Dodgers cap, too. Where had it gone? The same place as Mr. Pollack's robe? Martina had packed the robe in her bag Monday morning. When she was forced off the bus by Jose and his brothers, I pictured her

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quickly dumping the bag in a garbage bin at the bus stop, hoping to retrieve it later.

The ring was right where I thought it would be: among the discards that had shrouded Malibu Mike the night he had died. The Dodgers cap he had been wearing got me thinking in the right direction. If Malibu *had* found Pasqual's cap, maybe he found the bag left behind by Martina. After all, that bin had been his spot.

Good old Malibu. One of his layers, I learned, had been an old robe—and wedged into the corner of the left pocket had been a diamond ring. The police had listed it but not made the information public.

Mrs. Pollack didn't feel right about keeping the ring, so she contributed it to the burial committee for Malibu Mike. Malibu never lived wealthy, but he went out in high style.

DETECTIVERSE

WEDDED BLISS

by JACKI LIPPMAN

"Some toast, my love?" she said to him.
I wish that it would choke you.
"No, thanks, my dearest," he replied.
If I had a gun I'd croak you.
"What time for dinner?" she inquired.
I've had it with your cheating.
"I'm thinking six," was his reply.
I've had it with your bleating.
"Well, off you go, then. Can't be late—"
And also can't be trusted.
"I'll take the car in for repairs."
Your brakes could be adjusted.
"A perfect couple," say their friends,
"True love that never pauses."
How strange that they both died today
Of accidental causes.

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a *NEW* Boley-McKee story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Both the woman and the girl had pleasant, open faces surrounded by curly black hair. The mother smiled broadly, the child timidly. Geneva Boley's neighborly instincts took over. "Come in out of the hot sun." She held the screen door open . . .

NO CRADLE OF PINE

by JOHN F. SUTER

Alone in the house on a warm afternoon in early September, Geneva Boley mistook a sound on the TV in the next room and went to the carport door, thinking that her husband and Sheriff McKee had returned. That was when she saw the trio coming down the gravel drive from the paved ridge road.

The woman had altered her pace to that of the little girl, who appeared to be about twelve. The mother, around six feet tall with a large frame, carried a baby completely covered by a thin pink blanket.

"You lookin' for somebody?" Geneva called.

"Anybody'd let us have a drink of water and a place to set down," the woman answered.

Geneva pushed at her light-brown hair. Why were they coming here? There were other houses on the ridge road closer than this.

Both the woman and the girl had pleasant, open faces surrounded by curly black hair. The mother smiled broadly, the child timidly. Geneva's neighborly instincts took over. "I think that could be arranged," she said. "Come in out of the hot sun." She held the screen door open.

She let the little girl pass first, but when the woman was about to enter, Geneva extended a hand and pulled back the pink blanket

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still covering the baby. "Forgive me," she said. "I'm so afraid it'll smother."

The woman took no offense. "The sun might be too much for him. He's only five days old."

Geneva reddened. The baby was covered for protection. She glanced up toward the road. "Where'd you park?"

"Didn't. We walked."

Geneva stood in the doorway, speechless. She barely noticed that the others had gone straight into the kitchen. The girl was seated at the table, facing her. By her feet was a modest, multi-purpose bag of blue plastic. The mother had pulled a chair away from the table and was seated with the baby across her thighs—the open blanket showed it to be sleeping peacefully. By the woman's feet was a large duffel that Geneva noticed for the first time.

"Did I understand you?" she said. "Did you say he's five days old?"

"That's right. Isn't it, Ruth Ellen?"

The girl nodded.

"But the hospital—"

"Wasn't in the hospital," the woman said. "Had him at home, all by myself. Put me in mind of the old folks. Used to have their babies right out in the field, lay 'em in the shade, then go right on workin'."

Geneva came into the room and seated herself on a kitchen stool. She had never met anyone like this.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

The woman opened the blanket to inspect the baby's diaper. Satisfied, she adjusted the covers slightly. "Up near Franklin," she said.

Geneva stared in disbelief. "Franklin? That's about a hundred miles from here."

"A little more, maybe. Not easy miles, neither."

"And you walked it?"

"A good bit."

The girl spoke up. "We got a ride or two."

Geneva stood up. "What am I thinkin'? You asked for water. Sounds like you really need it."

She got two glasses from a cabinet and filled them from a jug in the refrigerator. The girl drank eagerly, the mother in small, measured swallows.

Geneva waved a hand toward the ridge road. "Am I the only one you could find at home?"

The woman set her glass on the table, but kept her hand close. Water was still left.

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"Didn't try," she said. "Your house looks nice. All that big stuff out back, your man must be a hard worker. Figured you'd be good people."

Geneva had never looked at her husband's heavy machinery in that light before, as evidence of affluence. "I don't know how good we are," she said, "but we try to treat everybody right." She glanced out of the window. "As for all that stuff of Arly's, it's not all ours yet. Bank's still got claim on some of it."

"Don't they all," the woman said. "By the way, I'm Lila Anderson. This here's Ruth Ellen."

"Geneva Boley. My husband's Arlan." She looked out the window again. "And he ought to be gettin' back here. He's had a call to look about some gradin' a man wants done." She turned to the Anderson woman. "Where you goin'?"

"Huntington. I got a cousin there."

Geneva shook her head. "Walkin'? That's maybe even a bit farther than you've come."

The big woman smiled. Her confidence was unshakable. "We'll make it."

"But with that little a baby—"

The mother dismissed it. "He comes from good stock. I'm not worried." She studied Geneva. "Since we're talkin' about this little feller, I'll just ask it now. I would have, anyway. Miz Boley, how would you like to buy him?"

Geneva laughed uncertainly. "*Buy* him? Don't joke about a thing like that." She looked at the girl. "You wouldn't let your mother sell your baby brother, would you?"

The child stared at the table. "Nobody wants him."

Lila picked up on it. "That's not quite true. His daddy left us because he showed up. His own kid, too. Ruth Ellen wanted me to have a little girl. And I need money."

In afterthought, she said, "I'd not be the first to put her baby out for adoption."

Geneva said, "I already have two children, a boy and a girl."

Lila's tone was persuasive. "Where would you be if somethin' happened to one of 'em? Or both?"

"I'd just have to live with it."

"But what would your husband think if it happened? If he knew you passed up—"

"There's no reason we couldn't have one of our own."

"Well, then—"

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Geneva changed the subject quickly. "Can you carry enough with you to make out? The baby? Ruth Ellen? You?"

"We've not come up short yet."

"This soon after deliverin'—don't you need pads? I could let you have some."

Lila's gaze was steady. "No problem. Anyway, I have another question."

Just managing to speak, Geneva said, "What is it?"

"If you won't take the baby, could you point me to somebody who might?"

Geneva hesitated. "I don't know. I'd have to think."

"All right. Take your time."

In spite of herself, Geneva asked the question. "How much would you want?"

Lila absently stroked the baby's head. "Can't put a figure on it. I think maybe five thousand, at least. I seem to have heard that's what some of them get. That oughta tide us over a little while now that Ray's gone and left us. Maybe I can get me a job, but there's still Ruth Ellen. I think five thousand dollars. More, if I could get it."

Geneva was about to respond when she heard the sound of tires crunching on gravel. She got up to open the door.

The sheriff's car was coming down the drive. He was bringing Arlan Boley home as he had promised.

"I'll run through it again," Boley was saying. "The leak in your basement is best got at from outside." He outlined digging down to the footers, waiting until a waterproofer did the treatment, then ditching and backfilling.

McKee gave him a quick glance. "How much?"

"Depends on what I run into. You know I won't rob you."

The discussion ended abruptly. As the car pulled up to the doorway, both of them saw Geneva making small beckoning gestures.

McKee glanced at Boley, his face expressionless. "I suspect she wants us both." He shut off the motor.

"Hello, Warren," Geneva said to him from the door. "You and Arly come in. We have company."

Boley slipped his tall body from the car, ducking his head so that his crinkly blond hair cleared the house-door frame. He heard McKee's shoes crunch gravel.

"Go on in," said Geneva. "Both of you . . ."

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When Lila Anderson had finished her explanations again, at Geneva's urging, Boley and the sheriff sat looking at each other. Boley knew that his face wore a half stunned look. He knew that he was hearing the woman propose an illegal act. He wondered how McKee was taking it. McKee's well browned cheeks were relaxed, no muscle betraying his thoughts.

"I told her we weren't likely to take on any more children," Geneva said, getting conversation started again. "But maybe you have different ideas."

"No, I'd go along with that," Boley said, assuming an expression of sympathy for Lila's sake. "You say the three of you came all the way here from near Franklin? Walkin'? That's around a hundred and twenty-five miles. Down Randolph, Pocahontas, and part of Greenbrier Counties, up some pretty steep grades at times. I have to admire the three of you."

"We got some rides," Ruth Ellen said once again.

"We had us a room in Marlinton last night," Lila volunteered. "Right after we started out again, a big rig came by. The driver let us ride to this place, Levi, where this road up here commenced. That was as far as he was goin' in the direction we're headed."

Boley shifted in his chair. "How come you didn't just drop down through Virginia below where you lived, follow that way, then cut back west somewhere else?"

Lila answered without hesitating.

"Not so many cars go by, that way. More people live along the road the way we came."

McKee cleared his throat. "You might have found some people with money around Green Bank. Ones who work on the radio telescopes. You ask around there?"

Lila shrugged. "I talked to two or three. But I still got him, you can see. They did give me a little money and fed us. Last people let us rest overnight."

McKee nodded toward Geneva.

"You heard Miz Boley's reaction. You want some other names, I take it?"

Lila smiled. "I'd thank you. You know some?"

"This county doesn't have many people with a lot of money. The ones with the most are the ones with summer places over by the lake, and most of them have left now. However, we do have some others who are well off."

"If you'd tell me who and where they are—"

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McKee lifted a sinewy hand. "It'll take some little thinkin'. Meantime, I'm goin' to have to ask you to let me do somethin'."

"I guess I could. What is it?"

The sheriff leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees. "If you make any kind of a deal with anybody in this county over that little one, I'd be shirkin' my obligation if I didn't see to it that the other folks got a good healthy specimen."

"But he is!"

"I don't doubt you think so, Miz Anderson. All the same, I'm goin' to take him into town and have the hospital check him out. I think it should be pretty easy just now. For some reason, they're not over their heads, like sometimes."

Lila hesitated.

McKee said gently, "I can insist and do it, anyway. I'd rather we had no bad feeling."

Lila gave in. "In that case—"

McKee relaxed. "Suppose you stay here and chat with Miz Boley. Arly here can go along and hold him. He's a father, he knows how to handle 'em."

Lila's big eyes scanned his face. "All right."

"And one more thing," McKee said in afterthought. "I'd like to have Ruth Ellen come along. All that walk, she might be a little peaked. We'll have 'em give her a quick check, too. No charge to you," he added.

"You're bein' awful nice, Sheriff, but maybe—"

"Just tryin' to make sure that you and the little ones are all right while you're in this county."

The firmness in his voice was clear. Lila objected no further. She turned to her daughter.

"Ruth Ellen, you be sure and take that bag with the formula and the spare diapers." She smiled at Boley. "And if Mr. Boley needs help, you give it to him."

Geneva got up and went to the counter. "That reminds me." She took a pencil from a mug of pencils and pens and tore a sheet from a memo pad. She wrote quickly, folded the paper, and wrote on the outside. She came over and tucked it into Boley's shirt pocket. "Couple of things I need while you're all in town. I've marked it so you won't forget."

The baby whimpered slightly and Lila explored. "I'll have to change him before you go."

While Geneva showed her to a chair in the corner to do this, Boley

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removed the note and read Geneva's instruction: *Give to McKee.* He handed it to the sheriff.

McKee's eyebrows rose as he read it. He peered over to see if Lila or Ruth Ellen happened to be looking and passed the note back to Boley, who read it. *Could they tell you if he's only five days old? She wouldn't accept pads for the bleeding.* Boley refolded the paper and put it away again.

McKee nodded at it and said, "It's good you'll be lookin' after that little one, Boley. Never havin' had one, there's a lot I don't know."

In a dry tone, Boley said, "I've had two and I still have a lot to learn."

"Why don't we get in the car?" McKee suggested to him. "You sit in back. Ruth Ellen can sit by me."

In a few minutes, Lila came out with the baby wrapped in the pink blanket. Boley opened the right rear door and she laid the baby beside him. Ruth Ellen watched until her brother was safe inside, then she climbed into the front seat.

McKee backed and let the rear end ease into the downhill part of Boley's drive, straightened, then headed up to the ridge road.

He turned his head briefly toward the girl. "You know somethin', Ruth Ellen? Nobody's ever told me your little brother's name."

She was looking out of the window. Her head didn't turn when she answered. "David."

"David. A good name. A pretty good man was named that. Your mother or your daddy pick it?"

The girl turned her head and stared through the windshield. "She did. He never called him anything but *it.*"

McKee reflected. "*It.* Now, how did he come to do that? Is there anything wrong with that little boy?"

"No," she asserted, then lapsed into indifference. "He just didn't want him. Nobody of us does. That's why Mom wants to sell him."

"What if I called your daddy and asked him if that was his decision, too?"

"You wouldn't know where to call. No more'n I would. He pulled out and left us."

"After David came along," said McKee. "Why?"

"Because of him. He was real mad, and he slammed out of the house and left."

"He didn't want a little boy? Most daddies would, I'm told."

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Ruth Ellen shook her head. "He didn't want *any*—boy or girl. Said I was enough."

"He didn't like you? I can't believe that."

"He liked me, all right. He was always nice to me. He just thought the family was big enough."

McKee wore a puzzled look. "David shouldn't have been a surprise to him. Did he act surprised?"

"Yes."

"But he must have been blind all those months, sweetheart. Maybe you don't know—"

Boley spoke up. "McKee, she's a big woman. It could happen. It has happened—or so I've been told."

"Learn somethin' every day," the sheriff muttered.

He turned toward the girl again. Not sounding convinced, he said, "Are you sure you never heard your daddy say to your mother months ago, *You'd better get rid of it. You better not have it.* Anything like that?"

"I never heard him say anything."

"You say nobody wants him. That include your mother?"

"Yes."

The CB radio came alive with a break call. A woman's voice asked for McKee. The sheriff picked up the microphone and answered. "McKee here. Go ahead, Jean."

"It's Evans, Sheriff. He got run off the four-lane just south of town by a rig from Pennsylvania. You want us to set up a road block for the sucker or ask the state cops to get into the act?"

McKee debated the pros and cons of the situation on the radio. When they had nearly finished, he became aware that he had accelerated and was close to town. "Call the state cops," he said. "We might chase him close to the county line. Call the state cops. They could put a block at I-79. Sit tight. I'm comin' on in."

He signed off and spoke to Boley and the girl. "I have to stop at my office for a few minutes, but don't you worry. I'll be back with you before you know it."

In a short time, he was at the courthouse and into his parking space. He jumped from the car and went briskly into the building.

Boley yawned and stretched. "About twelve, are you, Ruth Ellen?" he asked.

"That's right."

"You have eight or nine interestin' years ahead."

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"I guess."

"About the same age as my boy, Carl. He gets along with his sister, Martha. But there's more of a gap between you and David. You afraid he'd be an anchor around your neck while you're findin' out what it's all about?"

She turned her head and studied him. "I never did think about it."

"Never thought you might be the babysitter now and then?"

"There's not a lot of that up our way. I've done it already, now and then."

Puzzled, Boley said, "Is there somethin' about him you don't like?"

Her answer was unexpected. "He's a boy."

Boley was silent for a moment. "But you'll be seein' a lot of 'em from now on. You're a pretty girl, even now. You just think you don't like boys."

He was afraid of the answer he might get.

She looked at him steadily. "Well, sure. I'm not *weird*."

"Well, then—"

"All this time, I get *promises*. From Mom. A baby sister. *How'd you like a baby sister? One of these days there'll be four around the house. Another little girl.* I ask you! Somebody I could share with. A boy, I'd have trouble with. Not on the same band most of the time."

Boley said, "I'm havin' trouble. I was the only one."

"Well, you at least have two kids." Ruth Ellen pointed toward the courthouse door. "Isn't *he* even married?"

"A widower. No kids. Bad luck."

The courthouse door opened and McKee hurried out.

"Got back as soon as I could," he said, climbing back behind the wheel. "Now let's get over to the hospital."

They drove without conversation for the next ten minutes before pulling up before a two-story yellow-brick multi-windowed building that was clearly a hospital. The parking lot was large without overwhelming healthy green lawns, flowerbeds, and well tended shrubs.

McKee parked in one of the limited spaces at the emergency entrance in the rear. "Everybody out," he said. "Fetch the baby, Boley."

With Boley carrying the baby and Ruth Ellen keeping a wary eye on her little brother, McKee approached the desk. The woman in white in charge of admissions eyed him dispassionately. "You have a problem, Sheriff?"

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"Sort of. No real emergency. Just need a couple of favors. No insurance, but the county will pay."

The woman had not relaxed. "Give me an idea of what you want."

McKee beckoned Ruth Ellen over. "I'd like one of your interns to give this young lady a quick check. Nothing fancy. She might be close to exhaustion and not know it."

The woman picked up the telephone and punched some buttons. "Hello, is Doctor Jordan available? If he has a moment, ask him to come to Emergency. No, no crisis. He might welcome this one."

She hung up and looked at McKee. "The other matter? You did say a *couple* of favors?"

McKee indicated the baby. "This little codger I'd like to have get a pretty good goin' over. Might take a while. Got any space in Maternity? They say he's only five days old."

She took up the telephone again and spoke at length in a lower tone. Finally, keeping the line open, she addressed McKee. "Maternity does have room and Doctor Hall, one of our pediatricians, is here just now."

"Jack Hall? I know him."

"You're to take the baby up to Maternity and discuss this with Doctor Hall."

"What about this young lady?"

The woman pushed a pad and pen across the desk. "Just write out instructions for Doctor Jordan and have this gentleman give them to him."

McKee busied himself with the pen. As he wrote, he spoke, watching Ruth Ellen from the corner of his eye: "Doctor Jordan. This is Ruth Ellen Anderson. She's come a long way, around 125 miles, and she's walked a lot of it. She might be tireder than she lets on. Give her a good look, but I think she only needs a good night's rest at Mr. Boley's. Sheriff Warren McKee."

Boley noticed that McKee wrote rapidly. He seemed to be putting down more than he was saying.

The sheriff finished, tore off the note, and gave the folded sheet to Boley. "Now let's have David," he said, "and I'll take him upstairs. If you'll tell me how to get there, ma'am?"

When McKee came back, Boley was alone in a chair.

"Where's Ruth Ellen?" McKee asked.

"With the doc. He took her around the corner."

"You give him the note?"

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"Yeah."

"You read it yourself?"

"I did. You think of everythin', don't you?"

"Nobody can do that, not even a computer. It's not impossible for twelve-year-olds to have kids. Lots of pioneer women weren't much older, if that."

He changed the subject abruptly. "I guess you're wonderin' why I'm goin' along with somethin' that's against the law. I want to find out, that's why. Then—"

Boley said quietly, "Your business. You tell 'em upstairs about Neva's question about his age?"

"I did. They'll give him a good goin' over. He'll be stayin' here overnight. If you and Neva can put up with it, let the mother and big sis bunk with you tonight. I'll get back to you tomorrow."

Boley shrugged. "We can make out. Maybe we can find out some more. I had a talk with the girl while you were in the courthouse."

"Learn anythin'?"

Boley told him, McKee paying close attention. Finally he said, "It helps. And maybe you do better with her than I do since you have kids. Suppose you talk to her on the way home. Along these lines—"

When he had finished, he said, "Now, get out of here and get Geneva those couple of things her note forgot to mention."

Ruth Ellen accepted David's absence with indifference. She slid into the front seat of the car without a word.

When they approached the edge of town, Boley leaned forward. "Ruth Ellen," he said, "one thing I don't understand is why your mother wants rid of David."

The girl shrugged. "We need the money."

"I don't doubt that. But there's a big gap between you and him. You'd think she'd want to hang onto him, as long as it took before he showed up."

"She doesn't want him."

"But you told me she talked about another baby to you for a long time."

"She did. A little *sister*. She told me what kind of crib she'd get for her, what kind of covers—all that stuff."

When she mentioned the crib, Boley's scalp tingled. A line from the old song: *There'll be no cradle of pine.* A sense of trouble arose.

"She must have sold you on this idea."

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"You can say that again."

"But it didn't take with your daddy."

The girl gave a short laugh. "When they had that fight—the last one—I heard him say, 'I thought you took care not to let this happen.' And she said, 'What makes you think I didn't take care to *make* it happen?' That's when he really came apart."

"I don't get it," Boley said. "She seemed to want a baby pretty bad from what you just said."

"She didn't get what she wanted, did she? Okay?"

"It's like she never grew up," Boley mused. "Like if she can't have what she wants, she doesn't want it."

Ruth Ellen answered through tears. "She was tryin' to get what she promised me."

After this she refused to talk. When they reached the house, she burst from the car and rushed inside.

McKee called around ten the next morning. "Baby's been cleared," he said. "Bring 'em all in. My office."

Boley took them in his Jeep, leaving Geneva to put the house in order. When he parked at the courthouse, he said to Lila, "Leave your stuff here. Maybe McKee'll want me to give you a lift. In fact, I'll run you down to Route 60, if he asks me or not."

Lila's face had been drawn all morning, but she smiled. "You're a good man, Mr. Boley."

McKee's office was on the ground floor, not far from the front door. It wasn't large and the two chairs in front of the desk made it seem crowded. His desktop had numerous papers, but it gave a sense of order all the same.

"I'll stand," Boley said. "Or maybe I'm just extra."

"No, you stay," McKee told him. "I might need you to correct me."

He gathered some papers and arranged them before him. "Now, Mrs. Anderson," he began, "most important things first. The hospital called and they say David is in fine shape—no diseases, no drugs, no nothin'. Just a little baby, less than a week old."

"Then I can—" Lila began.

McKee held up a hand. "Ruth Ellen Anderson, a good healthy girl. Not even overly worn out from all that walkin'. No sign she's ever messed with boys—if you read me."

"What a dirty way of thinkin'!" Lila burst out.

"It's nobody's business!" Ruth Ellen shouted.

"That may be," McKee said, unperturbed. "I apologize. Doctor

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Jordan apologizes. The question did arise: everybody was so anxious to get rid of the baby, whose was it? We had to eliminate one of you."

"Well, thank you for nothin'," Lila told him.

"In my job, I can't take a thing at face value," said McKee. He tapped a memo in front of him. "For instance, you said that some people did give you money instead of buying the baby. I naturally wondered if that wasn't your real aim. Sort of a con game. Pay your way to Huntington."

"Think what you like. You will anyway," Lila snapped.

"True," McKee replied. "However, we now come to the real core of this thing. Yesterday, on the way to the hospital, I stopped here and set up a bunch of calls and fax inquiries to sheriffs' offices in a number of counties both here in West Virginia and in Virginia. Franklin's close to Virginia, west of it in one way, north in another. I asked if they had any cases involving a very young baby." He riffled through some other pages, then looked at Ruth Ellen. "Young lady," he said, "when did you first see David?"

"When I came home from school the day he was born."

"Your mother told you she gave birth to him all by herself while you were gone?"

The girl looked down at the floor. "Yes, sir," she said, little more than whispering.

"Ruth Ellen, ever been to Harrisonburg, Virginia?"

She raised her head again and her voice regained a little volume. "Yes, sir. Ever' now and then."

"Takes about an hour, or a bit less, by car?"

"I guess."

"Sometimes your daddy leaves his car at home?"

"His pickup. Sometimes he got a ride to work."

"Thank you, Ruth Ellen," McKee said.

He turned to Lila. "None of these messages of mine turned up anythin'. Except one." He pulled out a sheet. "From Harrisonburg, Virginia. Seems some woman slipped into the maternity section of the hospital there about a week ago and made off with a baby. A little boy. Would you know anythin' about that, Mrs. Anderson?"

She stared at him in indignation. "I would not. Why would I steal a little boy when I'm tryin' to have my own adopted?"

McKee changed tack. "It was suggested that David wasn't as young as you claimed because you're not bleedin'. You might have been for a while after delivery. I suggest that you never gave birth to David."

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"And I suggest you mind your own business and get me back my baby."

"That's not about to happen. They won't release him without my say-so. I'm goin' to have him identified—and I'm bettin' on it. I'm also holdin' you for suspicion of kidnap."

He looked at Ruth Ellen with compassion. "We have to do somethin' with you, missy. Maybe we can track down your daddy."

The child burst into tears. "But why would she do it? She didn't want a boy."

"Exactly," said McKee quietly. "She drove over there that day, somehow got in where the babies were, and just grabbed one. She was fixated on a little sister for you, but some kind of pressure didn't give her time to check.

"She took the wrong one."

DETECTIVERSE

SALUT!

by SHARON McGREGOR

A toast! Let us drink to your health,
To your cunning, your charm, and your stealth!
Then when you've digested
The poison ingested,
We'll drink to your new widow's wealth.

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With Timothy in charge, no request was too difficult, too demanding, too obscure. "Impossible" was a word he dismissed with a genteel wave of his hand—the hand with the Florentine poison ring on its third finger . . .

TOO MANY ANTIQUES

by ROZ AVRETT

"Thank heavens, this isn't one of those two-way mirrors they have on TV cop shows," Myra Balmer mumbled as she checked her lashes, lips, lids, and hair in the overly mirrored foyer of her new husband's apartment. There was something eerie about the mirrored foyer, a chilly feeling that someone was watching her, making her feel guilty about her vanity.

Myra was a perfectionist, and what God intended plastic surgery had amended. But Timothy didn't know. All Timothy knew was that his antique-furniture business had more than tripled in the six months since he'd married the most successful interior decorator in suburban Warfield.

It was no chance meeting that threw them together at the annual Warfield Antiques Show. The photogenic blonde was as glamorous as her interiors and Timothy was lean and gallant, with a quick British wit and an accent to match. They had a glass of champagne together, shared snide remarks about other people's questionable tastes, and ended the evening dining at The Red Robin, Warfield's answer to country charm. (Myra had "done" The Red Robin, formerly a yellow-and-green-tiled gas station.)

Myra didn't charge fancy New York City fees. That was one reason for her success. And she'd been blessed with an innate sense of her clients' tastes—a vision that bordered on ESP. When Myra Balmer looked at a forty-year-old tract house, she saw an English cottage. She had transformed white elephants into eye-popping conference centers, barns into *petits châteaux,* impossible apartments into the stuff of dreams shown in the glossy, dazzling pages of *H&G* and *Architectural Digest.*

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Unbeknown to Timothy, Myra's next project was their apartment. Timothy, immersed as he was in his antiques business, hadn't done anything to fix it up since his divorce ten years before.

Not that it was bad—it wasn't. Just too many priceless antiques, all in the wrong places. Old Masters hung on the wrong walls. The rugs needed help. It cried for fresh paint, new draperies, and most of those mirrors *had* to go.

If antiques were Timothy's life, wood was his mistress. Until he'd pursued—and won—Myra.

When it came to furniture, there seemed nothing Timothy didn't know. He'd located a Louis XV commode that matched, down to the last detail, one a client had searched for for years in vain. In two months he'd turned up a dozen Chippendale dining chairs in the perfect shade of faded mahogany a client had seen at Christie's, and at half the price.

With Timothy in charge, no request was too difficult, too demanding, too obscure. "Impossible" was a word he dismissed with a genteel wave of his hand—the hand with the Florentine poison ring on its third finger.

Like his new wife, Timothy was a perfectionist. Unlike his new wife, he was a crook.

As an apprentice cabinetmaker in London, Timothy had learned the secret of aging new wood, to be used when antiques needed a replacement arm or leg. The expression the old master joiners used was "put the sun into the wood." New wood was almost colorless. Old wood had known the kiss of many seasons, the mysteries of the centuries.

As a result, Timothy could take a slab of cherry or walnut which a week before had stood in a forest and, through a series of subtle, yellow washes and a few wipes of Japan color followed by a hint of raw sienna, regress the wood to the Nineteenth, Eighteenth, or Seventeenth Century. (He had never tried to do anything older. There was little demand for Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century pieces except by museums, and even Timothy didn't trust his expertise quite that far.)

He used tools of the period for his carving and joining. Dowels, dovetails, pegs, no nails. He'd memorized all the old glue formulas and had an infinite number of old tacks for use on upholstered pieces. Very few chairs and settees retained their original damask or needlepoint . . .

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The moment Timothy left to catch the plane to Paris on an antiques-hunting expedition, Myra's three best workmen swung into action. All they needed was two weeks. Timothy wasn't expected home for three.

First they wrapped all the living-room and dining-room furniture in soft old quilts. Then they did the same, gingerly, with the paintings. They stored it all in the bedrooms along with the rugs.

Next they carefully torched off layer after layer of ancient paint from moldings, doors, window frames, and the mantelpiece. Then came the mirrors. The men crisscrossed them with heavy masking tape and slowly began prying them away from the walls.

Now Myra saw why the mirrors had been installed in the first place. The walls were lumpy and full of holes, some stuffed with newspapers dating from the Forties—*who had lived here, anyway?*

They would have to cover the walls and ceilings with plasterboard. Oh, well, Myra had seen worse. Much worse.

She was in the kitchen, packing up the silver to protect it from plaster dust, when Gus let out a bloodcurdling yell.

"Holy Toledo!" he screamed.

"What is it, Gus?" Myra cried. "Hidden treasure?"

"Mrs. Balmer, Mrs. Balmer—" Gus stammered, his voice cracking like a teenager's.

By the time Myra got to the foyer, three mirrors, two of them shattered, were lying on the floor. Shards of glass were everywhere and blood dripped from both of Gus's hands. Dave and Jim, the older men on the job, were gathered around Gus, pulling at the last of the mirrors. As they lifted it away, a skeleton, or rather a pile of human bones, crumpled onto the marble floor.

Now Myra understood why a chill had run through her each time she'd peered into that mirror. "Don't touch it—him—her!" she commanded. Her hands were clammy and her knees shook. For six months she'd been living in the same apartment with a corpse, or what was left of one.

"I better call the police," Jim said, heading toward the telephone under the plastic dustsheet.

"Dial 911," Myra said quickly. "I'd like whoever this is—er, was—out of here as soon as possible!"

"Right," Jim answered. He picked up the phone and punched the buttons . . .

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"I wouldn't worry too much about it, Mrs. Balmer," Detective Ginsberg said. "Whoever this was has been here a long time. Maybe since they put up the building. You don't happen to know how old the building is, do you?" He might have been asking her to show him some paint samples.

"About 1920 or so, I think," Myra replied. "But I've only lived here six months—since my marriage."

Detective Ginsberg smiled. "Even *I* read the social pages," he said. "Frankly, I'd be surprised if there's anyone in Warfield who doesn't know how long you've been married, or how long you've lived here. Why, Myra Balmer put Warfield on the map!"

Myra smiled weakly. "Thank you, Detective." What she needed was a drink, even a diet drink—brimming with caffeine.

"Once pathology and forensics take a look, we'll have all the answers," he said, confidence radiating from his handsome face. He slipped a small notebook and a Mont Blanc fountain pen into the pocket of his navy-blue blazer. He doesn't look a bit like Columbo, was all Myra could think.

As the policemen took the remains, zipped into a pristine plastic bag, out into the hall, Timothy, suitcase in hand, stepped from the elevator and up to his front door.

"Damn plane cancelled—some sort of hurricane in Paris," he said. Then he bellowed, "Myra! What is all this?" He gestured at the scene before him, the Florentine ring glinting in the overhead light.

"You're never going to believe this, dear," Myra began, and told him everything.

She finished at dinner at the local motel. After all, there was no way they could stay in their apartment now.

As Myra had rattled out the details, Timothy, barely listening, kept going over the details of how he'd gotten rid of Beatrice ten years before.

He'd drugged her Scotch. Easy, since she'd liked it so much, and so much of it. Then into the bathtub with her. A dozen or so large cans of wood stripper, then, little by little, skin and organs flushed down the john until only the bones remained.

Timothy had worked on the bare bones lovingly, first with the yellow wash, then the Japan color and the raw sienna.

Beatrice—who'd discovered Timothy's arcane ways with "antiques" and threatened to expose him unless he gave her a divorce and $1 million—was his masterpiece. Better even than the English

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mahogany breakfront with the fret swan-neck pediment, circa 1770. (He'd sold *it* for $1.5 million in New York City.)

Timothy smiled at Myra. There was no way they could trace Beatrice's bones back to him. No way in the world.

"Would you like an after-dinner drink, darling?" he asked. "After all, you've had an—unusual day."

Detective Ginsberg had been half right. Pathology and forensics had cleared the whole thing up, but it hadn't been easy—it had taken months, and even then they weren't *really* sure.

There had been many theories, but what it came down to in the end was that someone had walled up a corpse. But why would someone wall up a corpse in a seventy-year-old building when the corpse's skeleton showed she'd been dead since the War of 1812?

DETECTIVERSE

HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH

by LUCILLE SCHULBERG WARNER

Near the corpse upon the ground,
A cigarette butt was all they found,
But that butt became the best of leads
Because it was one of the widow's weeds.

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Raven tried to call out for his clothes. But he couldn't shout. He couldn't make a sound. Something in his throat seemed to strangle speech. It was like before . . .

RAVEN

by TERRY MULLINS

Educators say that teachers don't give enough attention to individual students, don't find and develop their talents. Educators were wrong in the case of Raven Penrose. He had no sooner entered high school than he attracted the attention of his basketball coach. His height and speed earned him a place on the team and good training and long hours of practice made him the star player at Hannibal High.

You could make a case that without basketball he might never have had enough interest in school to graduate. As it was, he graduated as the most popular boy in his class. Unfortunately, basketball didn't teach him to read or write, and neither did anything else.

When he entered Hannibal High School, it was predominantly black, and blacks were just beginning to call themselves African Americans. Raven fit in well. He soon came to be a leader among African Americans.

But Hannibal wasn't a safe place for white students, especially loners. Aaron Guyer was a loner, the only Jew in his class—a small, studious boy who wore thick glasses. On the first day of school, he was seated next to Raven and he stayed as close to him as he could for the next four years. During Raven's long hours of after-school practice, Aaron sat at the end of the court and did his homework—his own and Raven's. Then they walked home together. Fortunately, Raven lived three blocks beyond Aaron's house. They sat in the back of class during tests and Aaron would do both tests, slipping Raven's to him when the teacher wasn't watching.

Aaron survived four years at Hannibal without ever getting hurt. Raven enjoyed high school, too. He lived for the games. After graduation, Aaron went off to college and Raven got a job in the local

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supermarket. He had just started his fourth day at work when Thelma Schector was murdered.

Raven was operating the fork lift, moving cases of canned peaches from the loading platform to a corner of the warehouse, when he heard a scream. At the other end of the warehouse, three hundred and fifty feet away, he saw a man stabbing a woman. Paralyzed by shock, Raven couldn't move. The man stabbed the woman again and again while she screamed. Raven tried to shout and couldn't make a sound. Finally he shook off his paralysis and ran to help the woman. The man saw him and gave a final vicious thrust of the knife, then pulled open a side door and fled.

Almost simultaneously, three workers burst out of the meat department and almost fell over the woman.

Ten minutes later, the parking lot was full of police cars and the warehouse was full of police. A sergeant was explaining events to a detective. "These three clerks heard screams and came in here to see the woman lying in a pool of blood. The black guy here was running toward her as fast as he could run."

"Running *toward* her?"

"Yes, sir."

"How far away was he when they saw him?"

"About three hundred feet."

"Could he have killed her and run away, then turned back and run toward her?"

"They don't think so. He was running mighty fast, but they got here almost when the woman stopped screaming. And there's the door." The door was still open, but none of the workers had wanted to step over the woman to see if anyone was outside. "The door has blood on the latch and the outer panel. And we found a knife in a dumpster outside."

"Blood on it?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll check it for prints and we'll see if the blood matches the woman's. Was she dead when you got here?"

"Yes, sir. There wasn't anything we could do for her. She got it right in the heart."

The detective turned to Raven. "Did you see what happened?"

But Raven only saw and heard the detective as part of an unreal dream. More vividly, he saw a young girl lying in the street, covered

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with blood. He felt a numbness in his face and felt blood trickling down his neck. He couldn't speak.

"Why doesn't he say anything?" the detective asked.

"He's apparently in shock."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Raven Penrose. He's a new employee, hired just this week. No one knows much about him, but they all seem to like him."

"Well, he's our number one suspect. Take him in and test his hands for blood. And his clothes. If you find any sign of blood, book him."

Two police officers took Raven to a car and drove to the station. There he was led to a small room with a cot and told to undress. Still in a daze, he gave them his shoes, socks, shirt, and pants. They said that would be enough and left him sitting on the edge of the cot in his shorts.

He sat perfectly still for about ten minutes. Then he touched his chin with his hand. To his surprise, he could feel his hand moving along his jaw, his mouth, and his nose. He looked at his hand. There was no blood on it. And feeling was in his face. With that, memory of the young girl lying in the street receded.

He looked around the room, feeling cold and only half understanding what had happened. The door was partly open and he tried to call out for his clothes. But he couldn't shout. He couldn't make a sound. Something in his throat seemed to strangle speech. It was like before.

He had been six years old, his first year in school. The police found him standing beside the dead girl, his face covered with blood. Then, too, they took him in a police car, but they took him to a hospital. An intern washed his face and looked in his mouth and nose. He pushed cotton into his nostrils and told him to breathe through his mouth. "You'll be all right," the intern told him.

Then the police had come in to ask him questions. When numbness left his face, pain replaced it—his lips and nose hurt worse than anything he'd ever known. His teeth ached. And he couldn't speak. The police tried for hours but they never got him to speak.

Now they were trying again. The pain was back—or was it the numbness? He touched his face. There was neither pain nor numbness. He felt what he ought to feel. But there *was* pain, the pain of split lips and aching teeth and a nose full of cotton. He couldn't

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breathe. He opened his mouth wide and took great gulps of air. Yes, he could breathe through his mouth.

It was hours before the detective found him sitting on the edge of a cot, feeling his face and gasping for air. The detective threw his clothes on the cot beside him. "You can dress now. Then come into my office. It's right across the way. I've got to ask you some questions."

Raven dressed. He left the small room, walked through a larger room where several police officers were writing up reports, and opened a door on the other side. The detective and another man were seated, talking. The detective got up, showed Raven to a chair, and said, "This is Doctor Cratin. I'm Detective Harley. I hope you're feeling better."

Raven sat down.

The doctor was a morose man in his mid-thirties. Apparently he had been having an argument with the detective when Raven entered and he was determined to finish his side of the argument before he dealt with Raven. "You make more use of my M.D. than of my Ph.D.," he said.

Harley brushed aside his comment. "You've got a chance to use your Ph.D. now, so use it."

Still unsmiling, Cratin turned to Raven. "You saw the woman killed, didn't you?" Raven tried to say yes. His mouth opened and he tried to push the word out, but nothing came.

"Relax," said Cratin, "don't try so hard." His voice had lost the angry tone it had when he spoke to Harley. "Let's just settle for nodding for yes and shaking your head for no. Did you see the woman killed?"

Raven nodded.

"Was it a man or woman who killed her?"

Raven struggled to speak.

"I'm sorry," Cratin said. "I should have asked if it was a man."

Raven nodded.

"Tall or—no, show me how tall he was."

Raven stood up and placed his palm chest high.

"About five feet seven. Was he heavy-set?"

Raven nodded.

"A white man?"

Another nod.

"Did he say anything?"

Raven shook his head.

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Cratin turned to Harley. "That gives you something to go on, at any rate. I think Mr. Penrose will be able to speak in a few days. You can question him at length then."

Harley wasn't happy. He took a sheet of paper and placed it on his desk. "Can you draw me a picture of the man?" he asked Raven.

Raven shook his head.

"Try."

Raven took the pencil Harley pushed at him and drew a bulky figure which didn't look at all like the man he had seen. Harley, however, was interested. "You've drawn him with a moustache. Is that right?"

Raven nodded.

"And partly bald?"

Raven nodded, but added a few more strokes to the man's head. He hadn't been that bald, just in front.

"Are these blue jeans? No? Khaki pants? Yes. And a T-shirt. Did it have anything written on it?"

Raven shook his head.

Harley obviously thought he was getting somewhere. He took another sheet of paper. "Look," he said, "I'll ask you questions and you write the answers, okay?"

Raven shook his head.

"Why not? You can write, can't you?"

Raven looked down at the floor and after a while shook his head again. Harley sat back in his chair in disgust. "Here I have an eyewitness to a murder and he can't talk and he can't write!" He leaned forward and asked, "How *old* was he? Twenty? Thirty?" Raven nodded at thirty.

Harley rose and headed for the door. "We'll have to do the best we can with that: a white male about thirty with a small moustache, five feet seven, and balding in front. Last seen wearing a T-shirt and khaki pants." He strode out the door.

Cratin rose and put a hand on Raven's shoulder. "Actually, you've helped us a lot," he said. "They'll need you around here a while longer, I imagine. Try to relax."

Raven tried. But the harder he tried, the less relaxed he felt. From time to time, he tried to speak, to see if he could, but he never managed even an inarticulate grunt. He was dazed and more than a little terrified.

A while later Harley and Cratin returned, followed by Raven's

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mother. She ran to Raven, sobbing, and clasped him around the waist. She was a small woman, still wearing her waitress's uniform. Between sobs she asked if he was all right. He tried to say, "I'm okay, Momma," but he couldn't. He just stroked her back and closed his eyes and wished himself a thousand miles away.

"Your son is still in shock, Mrs. Penrose," Harley said. "He can't speak."

"Jes like last time."

"Last time?"

"When he was a lil boy. He saw a drunk driver kill a girl on a bicycle. The bicycle hit him in the mouth an' split his lips an' bloodied his nose. Dey caught de driver but de girl was dead an' my boy couldn' say nothin' for two, three months."

Harley sat down in dismay. "Two or three months!"

"Dat's right. It was his firs' year in school, right near de end of school an' he couldn' say nothin' all summa. He jus' start to talk a few weeks befo' school begin."

Cratin said, "That could account for his present reaction. He had a traumatic speech neurosis and seeing Mrs. Schector killed triggered it again." He took pity on Harley and added, "It shouldn't last that long this time."

Harley said, "He isn't hurt this time, Mrs. Penrose—I'm sure he'll be all right soon. Do you know a Thelma Schector?"

"Neva heard of her."

"Her husband is Heinreich Schector."

"Neva heard of him, neither. Did he kill her?"

"We don't know. We're looking for him now. We'll need for your son to stay with us. If we find Mr. Schector, your son may be able to identify him as the killer."

Mrs. Penrose gave Raven a final hug and walked to the door. "You take good care of my boy," she said. "I got to get back to work befo' de lunch crowd come in."

"We will. And Officer Kelly will drive you back to the cafe."

The next quarter hour was full of routine activity Raven didn't notice. Then Harley's telephone rang. He answered it and said, "Good—bring him in." He hung up and addressed Cratin. "We've got Heinreich Schector. If Raven can identify him as the killer, we'll have the case all wrapped up."

The door opened and an officer led in a belligerent man, short and clean-shaven. Raven looked at the bristling blond hair and shook

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his head. Harley addressed the man. "Mr. Schector, we need you to identify your wife's body. The officer will direct you, but before you go can you tell us who might have done this?"

Tears trickled down the man's cheeks and seemed to make him even more angry. "No! Nobody should want to kill Thelma! Let me see her!" The officer led him away.

Harley turned to Raven. "Are you sure that isn't the man who killed the woman?" Raven nodded emphatically—he was nothing like the killer.

"But you and he are the only suspects we've got," Harley insisted. "He's the right height. Couldn't he be the killer?"

Raven shook his head.

Harley sighed. "I suppose it could be someone from her old neighborhood—a rejected lover, maybe. They've been married a little over a year. Come with me."

Raven went with Harley to the police car, but he was worried. Harley said that he and the husband were suspects. In spite of what the supermarket workers said, Harley still thought it might be Raven. What if they didn't find the killer?

Thelma's parents were immigrants named Orpheos. Her father and mother were sitting on the front steps of their house surrounded by neighbors and relatives. Harley got out to speak with them. Raven stayed in the car and looked for Thelma's killer. He wasn't among those in front of the house.

As Harley talked, people began to look at Raven. Some of them gestured and their already shrill language rose in intensity. He heard one man saying that he had killed the woman. Their grief was turning to hatred and it was directed at him.

Finally Harley broke away from the group and got back in the car. He drove off slowly through the neighborhood and spoke to Raven absentmindedly, as if half to himself. "Keep an eye out. This is where she lived. Funny, but when I told them you had witnessed the killing, they got angry. That's not what I expected. One minute they were in grief and the next they were accusing you of killing her. And when I said there were other witnesses they still said you did it."

They drove for ten minutes and then Harley gave up and went back to the station.

Once there, Raven was plunged into a nightmare. Four men in

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business suits converged on Harley and began to pressure him to book Raven for murder. Raven couldn't tell who they were. One of them might have been Harley's boss. At first Harley resisted. Then he tried to conciliate them. Finally he said, "All right—I'll call in Whitby. If he says Penrose could have done it, I'll book him on suspicion."

Raven felt a chill begin between his shoulders and course down to the base of his spine. He held himself rigid, trying not to shiver.

The officer who had been the first at the scene of the crime came in. The four men with Harley moved in on him, telling him that Raven could have killed the woman. Harley called them off, then said, "From what you saw, could he have killed Thelma Schector?"

"No, sir," Whitby said.

Raven could hardly believe what he heard. The four men started shouting and crowded in on the officer again. He ignored them and kept his attention on Harley.

"Why not?" Harley asked him.

"He wasn't even the closest person to the victim. Others who were closer and got there moments after her last scream said he was at the other end of the warehouse running toward her. There was blood on the door and the murder weapon was found *outside* the building in a dumpster."

"Are we sure the knife in the dumpster was the murder weapon?"

"Yes, sir. The report is on your desk."

"Thank you, Whitby." Harley turned to the other men. "Well, do you want to go before a jury with that evidence?"

Harley stood staring at the door after the disgruntled men for a long time. Then he turned to Raven and said, "If only you could talk. I guess it's no better? No, don't try. That just makes it worse. But if you could write—can't you write *anything?*" He handed a sheet of paper and a pencil to Raven.

First Raven wrote his name carefully. Then he wrote 1 2 3 5 6 7 8 10 crudely. There were smudges where he tried to make a four and a nine.

Harley stared, unbelieving. "That's all?"

Raven nodded. He was slowly beginning to realize that he had missed something in his life.

Before Harley could speak again, the telephone rang. Harley answered and said, "Who is this?" Then he put the receiver back,

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opened the door, and shouted across the office, "Can you trace that call?" Then he called two other detectives to him.

"I just got a call from a woman who said we'd better get—this man here—or they would. I'm sure I recognized the voice as the victim's mother. There's something rotten here. Do we have anyone on the force who knows that neighborhood?" The two detectives consulted and didn't think so.

"There was one guy in the crowd at the Orpheos place who didn't go along with the rest of them when they said Penrose killed her." Harley took out his notebook. "I wrote down all the names. Here he is, Angelo Biggans. We'd better not bring him in here and I don't think he'll want to be seen talking with me, but find him and see what you can get out of him."

When they had gone, Harley turned to Raven. "Thelma Schector's family is out to get you. I can't hold you here any longer, but I'd hate to have anything happen to you. Why don't we have lunch and then come back and see if there are any more developments?"

Raven wasn't hungry, but lunch sounded as good an idea as any, so he agreed.

Lunch took an hour and a half. When they returned, the two detectives had just come in. "We found Biggans," one said, "and he was eager to talk if we kept it off the record.

"The whole family disapproved of Schector and tried to keep Thelma from marrying him. She quarreled with all of them about it—including two brothers, a sister, three aunts, an uncle, and five cousins.

"Biggans thinks she married partly to get out of a bad situation. One brother was especially jealous of Schector. Biggans hints that that brother, Jason, may have loved his sister with more than brotherly affection.

"Jason's about five feet seven, thirty-two years old, balding in front, and has a moustache."

Harley gave a small and deadly smile. "Got him!"

"We thought you'd like that. Biggans says Jason was in the alley behind the house when you interviewed the Orpheos family. They're fixing their basement and have the alley blocked with bricks and bags of readymix cement. Jason was mixing concrete when you were there."

"That sounds like an all-day job," Harley said. "We'd better go back. You two come in from the south end of the alley. We'll come

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from the north end. Don't drive in close until I give a sign. I want to let Penrose have a good look at Jason. If he's sure that's the murderer, we'll arrest him."

The alley was narrow. Harley drove halfway to the Orpheos house and found the way clogged by six trashcans. He and Raven got out and walked slowly toward a pile of bricks. They could see the other detectives in their car at the other end of the alley.

Harley moved to one side of the alley. Raven walked in the middle. They were among the littered bricks and bags of cement when Jason came up from his basement. Raven froze and pointed at him. Harley signaled to the other detectives and walked forward.

But Jason saw what was going on and, reaching behind him, came out with a gun. Harley dropped behind bags of cement and drew his pistol, but Jason was already firing at him. Spurts of cement dust jumped from the bags as bullets stabbed into it. Raven picked up a brick and threw it with all his strength. It struck Jason in the groin and dropped him.

When the detectives arrived, Harley was brushing cement dust from his suit. He let them handcuff Jason.

Once Jason was in jail, Harley took Raven back to the supermarket and told the manager how things stood. Raven got back on his fork lift and finished moving the cases of peaches from the loading platform while the other two talked. He finished before they did.

The manager came over and said, "The detective says you saved his life. You've had a rough time. Take the rest of the day off." Raven nodded his thanks and walked out of the warehouse. He had nowhere to go. There was no one at home. His inability to speak would embarrass his mother if he went to the cafe. There was only one place to take his agony.

With a strange feeling of pleasure and anticipation, he hurried to Hannibal High.

He went to the gym looking for Coach.

Four kids were on the floor and they recognized him. "Hey! It's Raven!"

They came running at him and swarmed all over him. He saw the coach coming on the court, but before he could wave at him the kids had his arms and were pulling him to center court. They handed him a basketball. "Let's see you dribble past us," one said.

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Raven smiled. It was, he realized, the first time he had smiled since the killing.

He stood in the middle of the floor and bounced the ball twice. Then he sent it arching to the hoop.

"Man! Didja see that? He sunk it from center court!"

It felt natural, the way it felt to throw that brick at Jason. The feel of muscles obeying your will. Eyes, legs, arms, hands, even fingers all working together perfectly. He caught another ball thrown by the coach and turned to the other basket. He put all his emotions—fear, disappointment, and frustrations—into it. Like the brick, like the other ball, this one soared exactly where he wanted it to go.

The kids went wild. The coach came over and shook his hand. "You still got the old touch," he said. "I bet that felt good."

"Yes, it felt good." Raven found he could talk. He didn't have to force the words out—they came out soft and easy. "It felt *real* good," he told the coach.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

IMAGINE HIS SURP—

by SHARON PETTYPOOL

There was a young man from Beloit
Who married a lass from Detroit—
He knew she was wealthy
And too doggone healthy,
But at murder he was quite adroit.

One day he planned her demise
As they watched a mountain sunrise—
On the cliff he lunged,
But she ducked and *he* plunged.
She said, "You're insured, darling. Surprise!"

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a distinguished reprint by

REGINALD HILL

When Mr. Woodhouse sighed and said "Poor Emma!" the company responded with gentle amusement, recalling how Emma's governess and friend had become "poor Miss Taylor" the moment she married the widowed Captain Weston, and Emma's elder sister had become "poor Isabella" even before she married Knightley's younger brother, John. To be "poor Emma Knightley" was a fate which every maid and not a few matrons in the neighbouring countryside envied heartily.

If Jane Austen had chosen to write a murder mystery this would be it. A remarkable tour de force . . .

POOR EMMA

by REGINALD HILL

Emma Knightley, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly forty-one years in the world with little to distress or vex her.

Except for her husband.

"Poor Emma," her father would sigh when forced to a reluctant admission that George Knightley's presence at Hartfield was by right of marriage rather than of neighbourly visit. It was not that he thought ill of Knightley. Had the Prince Regent himself won his daughter's hand, old Mr. Woodhouse would still have thought his daughter to have fared badly, which indeed few might have disputed, as the Prince Regent already had more wives than was customary in this part of Surrey.

But against Knightley no such objection, or any objection at all,

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could be raised. In rank and wealth, as the owner of Donwell Abbey and its flourishing estate, he was the unchallenged first man in the hierarchy of the little township of Highbury and its environs. In character, he was sensible and resolute; in taste, he was sober and moderate; in conversation, he was pleasant and serious; in person, he was manly and handsome.

It was only in the matter of age that any reservation of total approval could exist, and it was generally agreed that the eighteen years by which he was her senior merely gave him a maturity of experience which perfectly complemented a certain lightness and even frivolity in Emma's own still unformed character.

So when Mr. Woodhouse sighed and said "Poor Emma!" the company responded with gentle amusement, recalling how Emma's governess and friend had become "poor Miss Taylor" the moment she married the widowed Captain Weston, and Emma's elder sister had become "poor Isabella" even before she married Knightley's younger brother, John.

To be "poor Emma Knightley" was a fate which every maid and not a few matrons in the neighbouring countryside envied heartily.

How well the marriage had started! Emma indeed had at first hesitated to accept Knightley's proposal. Her father's delicate constitution had already suffered such nervous damage at the defection of poor Miss Taylor and poor Isabella that she feared to administer it a third blow. To abandon him at Hartfield was unthinkable; and any plan to carry him with them to Donwell Abbey would almost certainly prove fatal to one who would by preference never make any journey longer than the perilous trip between his bedroom and his parlour.

But Knightley, with that keenness of intellect and nobility of action for which he was justly famed, had solved the problem by proposing that he and Emma set up house in Hartfield, leaving their transfer to Donwell Abbey until a time of more convenience. This last phrase was a way of avoiding direct reference to what had seemed imminent for many years, Mr. Woodhouse's death. A fair age already (he had not married young), and by temperament even older, he had led the life of an invalid for so long that it seemed probable that even this gentlest of blows would quickly drive him down.

But the expected event (expected by all except perhaps Emma, and doubtless Mr. Woodhouse himself) was not quickly forthcoming. The years went by. Knightley rode daily to Donwell Abbey to oversee

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the affairs of his extensive estate. But in truth there is a large difference, though subtle to perceive, between a man's rising of a morning and throwing back his curtains and looking out and saying, "All this is mine! I must not neglect to tend and improve it!" and a man's riding to work like any common factor and riding home again at night. Gradually the visits ceased to be diurnal. At first they still occupied the larger part of a week, but eventually Knightley discovered he could take care of Donwell by the application of his energies there on two afternoons solely.

Hartfield offered even less challenge to his powers of organization. His stables he had already transferred there from Donwell and these he set about developing, soon acquiring a reputation for having some of the best mounts in the country, a reputation he was not unwilling to support on the hunting field. From hunting to racing horses is a short step, and here too he did not care not to be predominant.

Emma did not share his love of equestrianism. To her a horse was the motive power of a carriage or a plough, no more, no less. But she was content enough with her role as Mrs. Knightley, mistress of Hartfield and Donwell, and beyond any doubt first in precedence in Highbury. Only once was this right to the primacy challenged. After about ten years of marriage, the even tenor of life in Highbury was disturbed by the death of poor Miss Taylor's husband, Mr. Weston. He was a man impossible not to like and Emma mingled her genuine tears with her friend's.

The funeral was to be a large affair and the solemn anticipation of the event was somewhat disturbed by the news that Mr. Frank Churchill was definitely going to attend. As Mr. Frank Churchill was Mr. Weston's own son by an earlier marriage, this may have seemed an event more to be marked by its omission than its occurrence, but he was a man whose early arrival had always been more forecast than forthcoming. Brought up by his uncle and aunt in Yorkshire, who had sufficiently loved him to give him their name and make him their adoptive heir, he had married Miss Jane Fairfax of Highbury at about the same time as Emma and Knightley were wed. Since then little had been seen, though much had been said, of the young couple. Mr. Weston's paternal pride burnt all the hotter for being fuelled by absence and neglect, and his delight in the news that Churchill had at last come into his inheritance caused Emma to say, "He talks of it as a deed so noteworthy that one might almost

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think Frank Churchill had actually murdered his adoptive parents for their money!"

That there had been a very great deal of money Mr. Weston did not spare to broadcast far and wide. And though he himself was naturally not in a position to see it, the evidence of wealth was ostentatiously (Emma said "vulgarly") displayed in the magnificence of the Churchills' carriage and the sombre richness of their mourning dress. Jane Churchill's tall slender figure, stately bearing, and pale, almost translucent skin, were as well suited to the occasion as any stage tragedienne's (and perhaps the means were not dissimilar, murmured Emma). In the process, during the service, and by the graveside, there was no denying her and her husband their right of precedence, and Emma accepted her demotion with a becoming meekness.

After the funeral, they all returned to Randalls, the Westons' house, and gathered in the hallway, conversing in low tones, while Mrs. Weston went ahead into the drawing-room to make sure all was prepared for her guests' refreshment. After a short interval, a servant opened the double doors to reveal Mrs. Weston at the end of the room, and invited the guests to come forward.

Jane Churchill began to advance but in a second Emma was by her side, smiling brilliantly.

"Nay, Jane Fairfax," she murmured sweetly. "Among the dead, you have undoubted precedence, but now we are back among the living and you must give me leave."

And glancing coyly at Frank Churchill, who smiled so broadly it was nearly a grin, Emma advanced to comfort her grieving friend.

About this time, Mr. Knightley began to take an interest in politics and, being offered a nearby seat in the gift of a Tory lord, he was soon a Member of Parliament. This meant that during parliamentary sessions he spent two or even three days a week in London, some sixteen miles away. At first he stayed at the home of his lawyer brother, John, but not finding the large brood of his nephews and nieces conducive to mature political thought, he soon rented a small house for himself in a location convenient for Westminster.

The effect of his presence on affairs of state was not visible to Emma except in so far as her husband grew daily more opinionated. Also, as political debate seemed impossible unless accompanied by vast quantities of food washed down by copious draughts of wine,

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Knightley's already portly figure grew softer as his opinions grew harder.

Soon Emma began to feel within herself a growing disgust with both her husband's person and his manner, but not much more than her observation told her most wives felt for most husbands, so she saw no reason to let it spoil the even tenor of her life.

There was another cause for unease, however. Mrs. Weston, after a decent period of mourning, was expected by her friends to settle into an easy widowhood not much different, except of course for the unavoidable absence of Mr. Weston, from her married existence. Instead of this, her grief continued unabated, and eventually she declined into religion, to such an extent that it came as no surprise, though an incalculable shock to all decent people, when she embraced the doctrines of Rome. It was not that there was a general prejudice against the Catholic Church in Highbury, but there are limits to everything, and Mrs. Weston leapt over hers with a positively unhealthy fervour. Randalls she completely neglected, except for her husband's study, which she turned into a memorial shrine.

"My dear Miss Taylor," protested Emma. "Your personal faith is your own affair, but dear Mr. Weston died and, we must presume, remains a Protestant. Think of how bewildering to his poor spirit all this drapery, silverware, and candlewax must be!"

Mrs. Weston was not to be moved to even the ghost of a smile by her friend's wit and Emma departed "so thoroughly impregnated with incense," she told her father, "that I dared not go into Ford's to purchase a string of beads I have fancied lest the assistant there should imagine I wanted a rosary!"

But it was not just the incense and Mrs. Weston's increasing oddity which slackened the bonds which tied them. Emma's openness of character needed a confidante, but her pride needed the assurance of perfect discretion, and having met Mrs. Weston's personal confessor, a soft-skinned, brown-eyed priest with insinuating eyes, she had no desire to risk having her own problems incorporated in her friend's confession.

This left a gap in her life, for it is difficult and dangerous for a leader to create that equality which is the basis of trusting friendship. Mrs. Weston had never been her social equal, but her position as governess for so many years had created a relationship of interchangeable authority which levelled out as friendship. Who was to take her place? Mrs. Elton, the vicar's wife, would have leapt into the breach, but she was a woman of such a grating manner and such

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ineradicable natural vulgarity that it would scarcely have been possible to tolerate her as a housekeeper, let alone a friend.

Only one other woman fitted the part and that was Emma's own sister, Isabella. But Isabella, married to Mr. John Knightley, was resident most of the year in London, and that was sixteen miles away. At least a short visit was possible, and she proposed to her husband that she should spend a couple of nights in his town house in Westminster. He seemed oddly reluctant to allow the possibility of this, advancing a whole battalion of objections as if attacking an opposition bill in the committee stage.

"Besides, who is to look after your father if you come to London?" he concluded.

"That is all taken care of," said Emma tartly. "You do not imagine I would not ensure my father's comfort before all else?"

"No, I do not imagine that," sighed Knightley.

"Good. Then I shall come to London and stay at my sister's house as usual, though what she may think, knowing as she does that we have a house of our own in town now, I cannot imagine."

So it was arranged. But when Emma arrived at John Knightley's house in Brunswick Square, she found her welcome not what she was used to, and the change had nothing to do with her husband's house in Westminster.

"We are ruined, dear Emma. Ruined!" cried Isabella. "What is to become of us, I do not know!"

Emma, used to her sister's emotional hyperbole, settled herself comfortably in a chair and prepared to hear some tale of a mislaid purse, or a burnt dinner, or at the worst a lawsuit in which John Knightley's advice had proven ineffective.

Instead she was retailed a truly distressing tale. It was not just John Knightley's advice which had proved ineffective, but his management of a large trust fund which had been in the care of his firm for many years. It was not John's fault, Isabella assured her sister tearfully. The day-to-day management of the fund had been in someone else's hand, but his had been the ultimate responsibility. When it had come to his notice that large sums of money from the trust had been most injudiciously invested in doubtful shares, he had acted quickly to remedy the error. Too late! The shares had already collapsed, and though it was only through John Knightley's efforts that the losses incurred were not more severe, there was no gratitude to be expected from the guardians of the trust.

John Knightley himself arrived as Isabella concluded her tale of

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woe. He was a thin, scholarly-looking man, restrained of speech and manner, and while his wife could make a spoilt meal sound like a cataclysm, his dry, even speech made disaster sound dull. But it was confirmation of disaster he brought.

"First," he said, "I must personally make up the losses. It is my duty, my dear, and if it were not, the guardians have made it clear that they will sue me for negligence, against which suit I would have no defence."

"But the money, John, do we have it? What will it leave us? Answer my question, I beg you!"

"Two questions, I think, and so, two answers. Yes, we have it, answers the first. Nothing, answers the second. It will leave us nothing. No, please, wife, before you give yourself over wholly to the vapours, hear me out. There is worse. Word of this failure has spread quickly. Already the firm is beset by queries from clients fearful that I have embezzled every penny in the City! My reputation is quite vanished. I shall never get work as a lawyer in London again. Emma, you are better suited than your sister to deal with such emergencies, I think. I beg you to stay with her and offer what comfort you can."

This was the nearest to a compliment that her brother-in-law had ever offered Emma. At the time of her marriage, he had made it clear that he felt his brother was acting foolishly. As the years went by, and George Knightley's character had decayed as Emma's had formed, John had been more tender towards her, but Emma had never accepted his attempts at *rapprochement* since this would have involved an admission that her situation deserved sympathy, and her pride could not permit that.

Now she held her weeping sister in her arms and suddenly she saw an answer to all their problems, her own as well as the John Knightleys'.

"Sister," she said firmly, "cease your weeping, for all is to be well. Your husband will have work to do, your family will have shelter, and you and I shall visit and talk to each other daily, as it has long been my wish for us to do. You shall have Donwell Abbey!"

Isabella stopped crying immediately and looked at Emma with dawning hope.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The house stands empty, the estate lacks stewardship now that Knightley is so much in Parliament," said Emma. "Why should you

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not live at Donwell till Knightley himself requires the house again, which if Papa continues healthy may not be for many years yet?"

"Emma! Is it possible? Oh, too marvellous! Though I know it must be Henry's one day, and it would seem very fitting that he should grow acquainted with the estate—"

Isabella's voice died away in sudden awareness of her solecism. The fact was that Donwell Abbey was entailed, and in the event of George Knightley's dying without an heir the estate would pass first to his younger brother, John, and after that to John and Isabella's eldest son, Henry. The one flaw in Isabella's delight at her sister's marriage had been her awareness that Emma's first male child would deprive her own son of his inheritance. But more than ten years had passed with no sign of a pregnancy and Isabella had come to believe there would not be one. This present time, in the face of her sister's kindness, however, was not the best occasion to be voicing this belief.

Emma laughed, understanding her sister's thoughts.

"Don't look so distressed, Bella," she said. "I am not offended. And to show you so, I will go this very instant to Knightley's Westminster house and get him to put all matters in train."

Emma hated to waste time once her mind was settled and she sped round to Westminster as quickly as might be. A footman opened the door and tried to keep her waiting in the hall while he went to inform his master of her arrival.

"Fool!" she said. "I am Mrs. Knightley," and swept by him into a very prettily furnished reception room, calling her husband's name. He appeared within a few moments, looking black-faced and displeased, like a great Friesian bull.

"Emma, what are you doing here? I told you that I would call on you in Brunswick Square this evening if my duties permitted."

"I know you did, Mr. Knightley, but emergencies alter circumstances. Have you not heard of your brother's misfortune?"

"Something of it has reached my ears," he said negligently. "The silly fellow has been dipping his fingers in other people's salad bowls, so they say."

"Not so! It is a most tragic situation!" protested Emma. "I wonder you can take it so lightly. Let me explain it, and my solution, to you."

She did so, rapidly but with all necessary detail. When she had finished, she paused like an actress expecting applause.

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"What's this!" cried Knightley. "Let John and your giddy sister and their monstrous brood into Donwell? You must be mad, wife! What little I can spare to relieve hardship they shall have. I am a Christian and know my duty! But Donwell! Not while I live! Think on, Emma. When the old man dies, we shall return there ourselves. And what shall we do if the John Knightleys are camped all round the place, like the lost tribes of Israel!"

Emma was taken aback. She had not expected such opposition to her plan. She turned away from her husband and stood leaning against a pretty little marquetry table with a jewel-encrusted lady's fan on it.

"I have promised Isabella," she said.

"Then you must unpromise her as soon as may be!" said Knightley firmly. "Go at once and undo this mischief as quickly as you can."

Slowly Emma turned. In her hand was the fan.

"This is a very pretty ornament," she mused. "Is not this Lord Upton's coat of arms I see engraved on the handle?"

Lord Upton was the Tory peer who had sponsored her husband. Himself gross of flesh and torpid of character, he had a wife whose appetites were reputedly so voracious that even elderly clergymen spared to be alone in her company.

"No ornament," said Knightley, flushing. "Lord Upton and his wife called on me this morning. Her ladyship must have left it behind. Give it to me and I shall return it to his Lordship in the House."

Somewhere above them a board creaked, and Emma sighed and said, "A careless lady indeed. I should like to make her acquaintance. Give me her address and I shall return the fan myself. It will distance my mind and occupy the time, husband, for to tell you the truth, I do not look forward to being the bearer of such bad news in Brunswick Square."

"Give me the fan!" thundered Knightley.

"Gladly, if I were to be speeding back to tell Isabella all is settled. But you know how I hate to bring ill tidings. I have not seen your house, Knightley. Will you not conduct me round the upstairs apartments?"

Husband and wife faced each other for a long moment, he gross and frustrated and scarlet, she slim and erect and smiling.

"They shall have Donwell till John sets himself up once more," growled Knightley finally. "But I'll have an agreement! They shall not think themselves settled there forever!"

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"Of course they shall not!" said Emma, gracious in triumph. "I will bring John back within the hour to make arrangements. Here is this beautiful fan, husband. Take care to see her ladyship has it restored to her at once. I doubt she will rest secure till she can shade her delicate skin behind it once more!"

Now followed a period of much happiness in Emma's life, for she was always at her happiest when she felt herself the mistress of events and relationships. She did not doubt of her husband's infidelities, but so long as he kept them to the environs of the Palace of Westminster, and no rumour of them reached Ford's shop in Highbury, she would not pretend an outrage she could not feel.

Besides, it pleased her that his carnal passions were engaged elsewhere as she herself had long ceased to anticipate Knightley's corpulent embraces with anything but horror.

The John Knightleys were soon installed at Donwell, and the arrangement quickly proved satisfactory to everyone, even to Knightley. His lawyer, Mr. William Coxe of Highbury, and John Knightley, acting for himself, drew up a note of agreement covering the terms of John's stewardship of the Abbey estate. For several years, following Knightley's growing neglect, the revenues had steadily declined and the house itself had begun to assume a somewhat dilapidated appearance. Now all was changed. Under John's stewardship the estate prospered again, and the revenues soon equalled, then exceeded, their previous levels. Within a twelvemonth Knightley was congratulating himself gleefully on having got a first-class manager, free of charge, as though the whole arrangement had been his own stratagem.

Emma and Isabella, in the meanwhile, were rarely out of each other's company and usually in temper in it. It was true that from time to time Isabella put on airs as if she were the true mistress of Donwell and Emma felt constrained to remind her of her real situation. Isabella was immediately and genuinely contrite, though secretly she comforted herself with the thought that one day she might be in fact what she was at present by favour, and that certainly her beloved son, Henry, must eventually become lord of the estate. If she felt guilty at the thought that this could only be achieved by her brother-in-law's death, his treatment of Emma soon assuaged the guilt. In any case, hers was such an easy, sunny temper, taking pleasure—or pain—from the present with little real planning for the future (*that* was her husband's prerogative) that George's death

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only occurred to her as part of nature's course, never man's interference.

Emma, on the other hand, with a mind made for analysis (albeit often wrong) and a constitution for conspiracy (though frequently flawed) could not conceive of a desired end without a premeditated means, and she watched speculatively as Isabella pressed another large helping of venison pasty on her bulging brother-in-law; or sent to the cellar for another bottle of port to help the poor insomniac Member of Parliament to a healthy slumber; or spoke of a wild young stallion offered for sale at Esher horse-fair which only the best rider in the country could hope to master.

But whatever her suspicions, Emma had to admit that her husband needed little urging to pursue his excesses. Nor did retribution follow. He drank more port, and did not die of an apoplexy. He bought more horses, and failed to break his neck. He spent time in London even when the House had risen, and did not appear either diseased or debilitated.

But it was in the end his excesses which brought the two families to a new point of crisis.

As the years passed and Donwell prospered, the rising income from the estate was steadily matched and frequently overtaken by Knightley's increasing expenses. He kept no check, merely sending all his private accounts to his brother for settlement. John Knightley was not a man to act precipitately. He guessed that his brother would, after these many years in Parliament, hardly be susceptible to reason. Besides, he had his own large family to think of. It would not do to speak without preparation. If crisis there were (and a crisis there must be, of that he was sure) he would delay it until the time and occasion were of his own choosing. So he laid his plans.

First he dropped hints that he was thinking of returning to London to renew his legal practise. Alarmed at the thought of losing so excellent, and so cheap, a manager, George protested, arguing the uncertainty of the move, the unhappiness of the family. John considered. George pressed. John allowed himself to be persuaded. And George was so relieved that he raised no objection to signing a new note of agreement confirming John's stewardship of Donwell.

Six months elapsed, and one day as George was visiting the abbey his brother called him into the room which he used as his management office. His face was stern and he wasted neither time nor words.

"Brother," he said, throwing a sheaf of papers onto the table be-

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tween them: "These bills upon the estate, they are out of all proportion!"

"Out of proportion, John?" replied Knightley, taken aback. "What does that mean? Is there no money to meet them? Does not the estate prosper?"

"Indeed it does, brother. But only because of the labour and the care which your nephew, Henry, and I myself bestow upon it. Think on, brother. Is it just that we should see the fruits of our labour so wildly dissipated? That you are entitled to a good competence we do not deny. But that we should toil to pay for your pleasures while our own family suffers neglect and deprivation, where lies the justice of that?"

Knightley struck the table a blow which came close to splitting it.

"Dear God!" he cried. "Neglect and deprivation, you say? When all the county knows 'tis only my care and kindness that has kept you and your gipsy brood out of the workhouse! Will you deny me what is my own, sir? You are at Donwell on sufference! It is an act of my charity that you loll here at your ease while better men toil for a pittance. My property, sir. Recall that we are talking of my property!"

"And a pretty property it would be, brother, if it had stayed in your care!" cried John Knightley, becoming passionate beyond his customary cold and restrained nature. "What would it have been like if I had not so managed it these many years? Yes, it is your property, surely, but not yours without condition; it is not yours to pillage and neglect! It belongs to our family, sir. It is yours only in entail and upon your death it will pass to me. Or if I do not outlive you, sir, which the hard work and long hours I expend on Donwell makes not unlikely, then it will be my son's, and his after him. These bills are outrageous, sir. You must moderate your excesses or find other sources of finance for them. The law will be on my side in this, I promise you!"

"Other sources! The law!"

George Knightley rose to his feet, stuttering and staggering, so that it seemed for a moment as if the argument were to be resolved by his instant death. But then he recovered and strode out of the room, crying, "We shall see, sir! Other sources! The law! We shall see!"

Isabella, warned by her husband to keep herself and the children out of the way during George's visit that day, had naturally placed

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herself in a situation from which she could hear all, not a difficult task as the volume of the dispute attracted the attention of men in the fields two furlongs away.

Now she rushed in to her husband, pale-faced and alarmed.

"John!" she cried. "I have never heard your brother in such a rage. He will surely return with dogs and bailiffs to throw us out!"

"Let him try," said John Knightley. "Let him try."

"You are sure of what you said?" demanded Isabella. "You are sure the law will be on our side?"

"I believe it to be so," replied John. "These entails are complicated matters, but their aim is always to stop the debauchers of one generation depriving the next of its rightful due. Also, the note of agreement George signed has given me something of a trustee's standing in this. Besides, to test my position at law might cost him half of what the estate is worth anyway! He will scarcely risk *that!*"

He spoke confidently, but he knew that the battle was not so easily won. His brother might now appear as a hard-drinking, hard-riding, grossly self-indulgent and mammothly overweight country squire, but he had proved for many years of his adult life that he was a man of sharp judgment, well versed in affairs. He might not be willing to enter into the expense of time and money involved in legal proceedings, but he would certainly spend a bit of both in taking legal advice.

This was precisely what Knightley did, after a brief interval in which he raged around Hartfield, drinking brandy and threatening fratricide, to the disgust of his wife and the dismay of old Mr. Woodhouse, who feared that the rapid cooling consequent upon such an overheating must surely bring on a cold, if not a tertian fever.

Emma, when her husband had cooled into coherence, drew out of him an account of what had passed at Donwell.

As she listened, she found herself uncertain as to what her own feelings on the matter were. Indignation that Knightley should have been refused immediate access to the revenues of his own estate warred with understanding of her brother-in-law's motives. She herself regarded the waste of money upon pleasures she did not share with some horror, and would dearly have loved to find some device to limit her husband's expenses. But her pride in her position as wife of the owner of the largest estate in the district required that the John Knightleys be put in their place. As her husband sent for his lawyer, Mr. Coxe, she began her own campaign by sending a

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servant up to the Abbey, rescinding an invitation to dinner at Hartfield the following day, with the cold excuse that it was no longer convenient.

William Coxe came quickly. Twenty years ago he had been a pert young lawyer. With age had come a superficial gravity, but beneath it he was as light and lively as ever, with a love of litigation which went far beyond simple profit.

His first advice, which was to sue John Knightley for back-rental for the Abbey estate, a course of action which, if admitted, must surely end with the incarceration of John and probably all his family in the Fleet, was rejected. Also rejected were his proposals to send a posse of bailiffs backed by militia into Donwell, and to swear out a warrant of distraint before the local magistrate (who was George Knightley) against the said John, on suspicion of embezzlement, mismanagement, and general malfeasance.

"Come, man!" cried Knightley, his anger now finding a nearer target. "What? What? Do you tell me I should commit my own brother to the common jail? Is this your best advice, Lawyer Coxe? You show me your comb in this, sir, for it is a coxcomb's advice!"

Pleased with his pun, he allowed himself to be mollified by the lawyer's apologies, and when the man asked, "Then what is it you wish to learn of me, Squire Knightley?" he replied, "How to get my money, that is all I wish. This damned entail's at the bottom of things. All would be well if I could sell off the damned place and have a capital sum to live off."

Coxe now began to study the problem in a more moderate manner and within a few days returned with news, both good and bad. The bad was that it appeared that the note of agreement between John Knightley and his brother might indeed be seen as investing in John full authority for the discreet disposal of estate revenues. In other words, George could not take out of these revenues more than the superfluity after all expenses were met and a reasonable amount set aside for re-investment in the estate's future.

The good news was that the entail, drawn up nearly a hundred years before, could be interpreted as applying only to the estate as it existed then, and not in its expanded form a century later. Three generations of Knightleys, including George himself in his younger, steadier days, had made wise purchase of fertile land and productive farms on Donwell's boundaries till the estate had doubled in size, with much of the most profitable acreage being in the most recently acquired portions.

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"These are yours by common inheritance," argued Coxe, "and are therefore disposable as you wish, either by testament after your death or by sale within your life."

Now the dilemma which John Knightley had gleefully forecast for his brother was his own. To test the validity of Lawyer Coxe's judgment in the courts could eat up the entire value of the disputed land, and more.

Emma joined in her husband's triumph, and when she encountered her sister in Ford's shop, she was ready to greet her with all the condescending generosity of victory, but Isabella had gathered her younger children around her with a low cry of, "Behold your aunt who would rob your poor brother!" and swept them out of the door.

A farm and five acres was selected to be offered at auction. All the countryside understood this as a test case, and waited with the excited interest of spectators at a prize-fight to see how John Knightley would re[illegible]e general opinion was that he could not sit back and do nothi[illegible]re must be an injunction against the sale sought in a court of l[illegible]nd William Coxe sat back in happy expectation of a long, complex, and profitable case.

But John Knightley was not a man to let emotion rule sense. A few days before the proposed sale, he rode quietly down to Hartfield one morning and presented himself before his brother with an expression so mild and conciliatory that George's instinctive wrath was stayed in his bosom.

Emma, made aware of his presence in the house, had no such balm to her agitation as, with straining ear, she engaged her father in their daily session of backgammon. The sound of furious dispute would scarcely have calmed her feelings, but the silence that proclaimed its absence disturbed her so much that she quite lost track of the game and defeated her father three times in a row, bringing on one of his nervous headaches.

In the library, meanwhile, the two Knightleys were circling each other like wary animals.

"Brother," said John, "this is an ill business and I am sorry for it."

"I am sorry for it, too," said George, "but it is not of my making."

"No," admitted John. "I acknowledge I am much at fault."

George was quite nonplussed by this.

"No, well, that is to say— Brother, will you not sit and take a glass of madeira against the chill air?"

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"Thank you, I should like that."

John sat, George poured, together they drank, offering no toast, but implying a truce.

"Brother," resumed John, "I come to tell you there is no dispute between us on any important issue. Beyond doubt the estate is yours, while you live."

Instantly George was ready for wrath, but even more quickly John disarmed him.

"If it is your wish that I and my family leave Donwell, then of course we will depart within twenty-four hours," he continued.

"No!" protested George. "What talk is this? Shall I thrust out my own brother, and my wife's sister, and my dear nieces and nephews that I love?"

"It would look ill," agreed John, with no trace of satire. "But, brother, in this business of selling the farm, there we must look to all our interests."

Again George bridled. Again John was quickly a calming influence.

"It may be that you have the right of it. Or may be not. But let me ask you this, brother. What is it above all else that you want?"

"Why, nothing but what is mine!" declared George.

"Which nobody shall deny," said John. "We are close bound together in many ways, brother, and the one of us scarce can move without disturbing the other. There is the entail on Donwell; no one will deny your rights there, but the heir must have his rights, too, don't you agree? And then there is—" he made a gesture with his wine glass "—Hartfield. This is no small estate, brother, our two wives the sole heirs, and mine the elder sister, just as you are the elder brother. A strange cross-relationship when you think of it."

"There is no entail here," proclaimed George. "It will be left equally, I have the old man's word on it."

"Equal shares is how estates decay," murmured John. "It is the wasting disease that entails were devised to cure. Brother, think of this. If I die tomorrow, my Henry becomes your heir, and is of an age and ability now that he could run Donwell as well as I were he called upon to do it. When you die, he will have to do that, of course, and he will care for his mother and brothers and sisters, too, till they can care for themselves. But what of your Emma when you die? Suppose the old man to have died first. Then half of Hartfield is my Isabella's, which means it is mine, to do with as I will. I am no tyrant, and I would consult my wife's desires, but sisters do not

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always live in that rational accord that brothers achieve. There is no such difficulty in dividing up and selling off Hartfield as exists in regard to Donwell, is there?"

The threat, or rather the complex of threats, was presented so mildly that George Knightley knew a solution must be close on its heels, so he kept his temper once more, and said, "Continue, brother. I am listening."

He listened for half an hour, spoke himself for the other half, then both men went from the house and rode into Highbury together. John Knightley, feeling that in this case it would be neither wise nor diplomatic to represent himself, had summoned Mr. Ackroyd, a lawyer from Esher, to represent him, and he was already waiting in William Coxe's chambers.

"By God, brother, you were sure of your powers of persuasion!" said George with some irritation.

"Not so, brother, I was sure of your powers of reason," replied John.

The lawyers got to work. They would have preferred weeks, but driven by the two Knightleys, who, each in his separate way, were not easily to be denied, by the end of a long afternoon they had hammered out an agreement, inscribed it on paper, had it signed, countersigned and witnessed, and had copies made for each party's safekeeping.

The terminology was long-winded but the terms were simple. In brief, George Knightley invested the management of Donwell in his brother's hands during his lifetime, and after that in his nephew, Henry's. In return, he, George, would receive a fixed income from the estate revenues, and in consideration of this agreement John had signed an undertaking on his wife's behalf to renounce all her future interest in the Hartfield estate in favour of her sister, Emma.

Each of the brothers presented this agreement as a triumph. Each of the sisters received it as a disaster.

"You fool!" cried Emma. "Before, you had the largest estate in the district, and half of the second largest in fee, with the use of the whole of it in practice! Now you have given away Donwell, where we would have lived after my father died, with half of Hartfield at our disposal also!"

"You fool!" wept Isabella. "Before, we had the expectation of owning half of Hartfield in our own right! Now we own nothing!"

The brothers urged their own cases, talking of what would happen

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when this one died and that one died, but hypotheses of mortality are of little comfort to female pride. Emma and Isabella both felt themselves demeaned by the brothers' agreement, though only Emma felt enraged by the law which permitted her husband to treat as his own what was in fact hers.

Not the least unhappy outcome of this agreement was a permanent coolness of relationship between Emma and Isabella. On the surface, much of the old familiarity between the two households was renewed, but gone forever was that old easy trust which a shared childhood creates.

Emma suffered the worse for it. Isabella had her large family to occupy her mind and emotions. Emma had only her ailing father, her absent husband, and no one else besides. Mrs. Weston was plunged even further into her unhealthy devotions, and Emma did not care to make a friend and confidante of anyone else in Highbury's small society.

Also the whole question of the brothers' agreement continued to rankle with her much more than with her more easygoing sister. Indeed, as time passed, Isabella came to applaud the wisdom of her husband's action. She was, in all but legal fact, the mistress of Donwell, and her brother-in-law's decease, which his ever-increasing intemperance promised could hardly be long, would confirm her in this station.

Emma, on the other hand, had no advancement to look for. She had always considered herself the mistress of Hartfield since before her twentieth year; and marriage to Knightley, which had promised so much, looked as if now it was going to give her nothing but what had always been hers. This she might have come to accept, but there was a worse alternative threatening.

The trouble was that George Knightley's income from Donwell, though more than generous, for John was at pains to appear just in the eyes of the county, soon proved inadequate to his needs. To this income was added an allowance from the Hartfield estate of which he was the titular manager, though more and more in recent years, as her father failed and her husband floundered, Emma had taken over real control. Knightley applied to his father-in-law for an increase which Emma permitted to the limits of what the estate could bear. But when her husband within a twelvemonth demanded more, and in terms which sent poor Mr. Woodhouse into one of his trembles, she threw off any pretence that the decision was not in fact hers and said coldly, "Mr. Knightley, this will not do. You have foolishly

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given over one estate which was yours. You shall not drag down another which is not. What you receive now is enough for any two ordinary gentlemen. You shall have no more."

Amazed, for though his wife was not above scolding him, never before had she berated him as a master might berate a servant, Knightley flew into a terrible rage and raised his hand as though he would strike her. Emma did not flinch, but regarded him with cool contempt till the hand fell once more to his side.

"Not mine!" he thundered. "Not mine indeed, while that poor shadow still shivers on the threshold" (this with a contemptuous upwards gesture at the bedroom to which Mr. Woodhouse had retired with a bowl of soothing gruel) "but it *shall* be mine, madam! Oh, yes. It *shall* be mine!"

He strode out of the house, crying for his horse, and a moment later Emma heard the thunder of hoofbeats as he galloped away along the drive.

At that moment a wish that he might fall and break his neck drifted across her mind, like the first brown leaf that falls from the rich woods of summer. But it was hardly noticed, and soon all seemed green again as, warm with triumph, she went up to attend to her father.

In the months that followed, Knightley referred no more to money. Indeed his attitude was on the whole more concerned and conciliatory than for many a year, and though there seemed little evidence that he had moderated his habits, it pleased Emma to think that he was somehow managing his affairs so as to stay within his means.

For her part, she now dropped all pretence that the management of Hartfield was carried on either by her father or her husband, and after an initial affectation of surprise, all those concerned with the estate were happy to acknowledge openly what they had long recognized privately.

It was this new openness that brought Lawyer Coxe into a conflict of loyalties. Hitherto the affairs of Hartfield and the affairs of Knightley had been treatable as one. Now that was clearly not the case, and though his first and natural inclination was to put his loyalty to the husband before that to the wife, in the end he felt he had to speak.

The simple fact of the case was that Knightley had for some time been financing his excesses by a series of post-obit loans. The moneylenders, seeing the richness of the Hartfield estate and the weak-

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ness of its aged owner, had not stinted their offerings. While the debts that Knightley was running up had remained within the compass of the estate to repay, albeit with much trimming and selling, Coxe, who had made the arrangement, had been able to quiet his conscience.

But now Knightley was negotiating a loan of such proportions that Coxe could see no way in which the total debt could be repaid without selling off the house itself, and at this point he was constrained to speak.

Emma listened in a silence which the paleness of her handsome face did not let him mistake for resignation.

"But these figures are not credible," she finally interjected. "My husband's excesses, even if he worked at them night and day, could not eat up such a sum!"

"There is the interest," said Coxe.

"Interest?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Coxe, and named a figure which turned Emma's cheeks, already pale, almost translucent with restrained fury.

"He agreed that much? Oh, the fool!"

"It is not an unusual sum," said Coxe, defensive of his sex.

"Then there are more stupid fellows in the world than even I had dreamt of!" snapped Emma. "So, let me understand this. When my father dies and the estate descends to my husband and myself, these bonds fall due, and the law will require that Hartfield be sold to repay them?"

"If there is no other source of money, yes."

"What if my father has in the meantime disposed of the estate elsewhere?"

"Why, then, I fear Mr. Knightley would end up in jail, where he would be like to spend the rest of his days unless the debt were discharged."

"He would at least learn the art of frugal living there," said Emma, frowning. "And if he did die in jail, what then? Does the debt fail with him?"

"No. It is a charge upon his estate, and therefore upon his beneficiaries, which is to say yourself, Mrs. Knightley."

"That is a monstrous imposition!" complained Emma, whose rapid mind had been looking for ways to remove the value of Hartfield out of Knightley's way till such time as she might be able to enjoy it alone. "Does that debt never die?"

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"It would die with you," replied Coxe. "The law does not pursue beyond the first heir. And of course it would die if Mr. Knightley predeceased your esteemed father. That is the risk the moneylenders take in these post-obits. They are careful to study the health of those concerned. In this case, the dangers your husband faces in the hunting field would be set against the age and reported frailty of Mr. Woodhouse. The degree of risk to the lenders is, of course, reflected in the interest rate."

Which was so high that the lenders cannot have been too impressed with Knightley's hopes of longevity, thought Emma. But it would have been higher had they known that Mr. Woodhouse had continued in the same frail state of health for more than half a century now!

Perhaps after all her father would outlive her husband. And a little flurry of brown leaves drifted down from the summer trees.

And so Emma Knightley approached her forty-first birthday, concealing beneath her still beautiful exterior the anxieties which would have scored ageing lines on weaker flesh.

She had instructed Lawyer Coxe to say nothing of their conversation to her husband, an imposition of silence he was all too happy to accept. She meanwhile made a visit to London, where she consulted another lawyer who confirmed what Coxe had said but assured her he could put all to rights with a deed of separation, linked by a codicillary convenant to a testamentary trusteeship, upon which she recognized him as a charlatan, eager to dip his own spoon into this rich country mess, and returned to Hartfield resolved to put no more trust in lawyers.

On her return with a trunkful of the new fashions which had been her excuse for visiting London, she found Highbury buzzing with the news that Mr. Frank Churchill was soon to visit Highbury.

Nothing had been seen of Churchill since the occasion of Mr. Weston's funeral, but news of such a celebrity could not fail to be brought to the town. Five years earlier, there had been general shock and sorrow at the news of his wife's decease. It seemed that the interesting paleness of Jane Fairfax's complexion stemmed not from the application of powder to cover disfiguring freckles, as some had suggested, but from a natural pre-inclination to consumption, which dreadful disease had struck her down. Mr. Churchill (so it was reported) had long mourned her death, but finally his natural high spirits had been recovered and now he was touring the country to

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renew old acquaintance. What more natural than that he should visit his stepmother, particularly as Randalls would, by Mr. Weston's will, become his on Mrs. Weston's death.

It was not anticipated that he would find life at Randalls very congenial.

Mrs. Elton, the vicar's wife, so eager to be first as to be always forward, had arranged a "little evening assemblage" at the vicarage to welcome what she called "the prodigal." Emma had little mind to attend, till she heard that the John Knightleys were going, upon which she accepted the invitation, planning to stay only long enough to reconfirm the George Knightleys' precedence in Highbury.

They arrived late, and found the gathering already crowded with Highbury notables, loud in conversation, but Emma's appearance in the most daring of her new London gowns was so striking that she was at once the object of all eyes. Mr. and Mrs. Elton she greeted with a charming condescension, putting them with a single smile both at their ease and in their place.

Frank Churchill was deep in conversation at the room's centre with Isabella and John Knightley. Emma and her husband joined the group. Within half a minute, by a turn of her shoulder, a flutter of her fan, Emma had put Frank Churchill face to face with her, and thirty seconds after that they were having a tete-a-tete while the Knightley brothers and Isabella formed a quite distinct and, in Isabella's case at least, slightly disgruntled group a few yards away.

"You have not changed, Miss Woodhouse—Mrs. Knightley," smiled Churchill.

"You must call me Emma," she answered lightly. "We are old friends, are we not?"

"Indeed I hope so. You have forgiven me, then, for pretending to be a little in love with you all those years ago?"

"I can forgive everything but pretence," she replied.

"Then let me urge that it was not altogether pretence," he said with a laugh.

"Then let me assert that you are not altogether unforgiven. Tell me now, what do you think of us at Highbury, you who are such a stranger here? Will you stay long among us?"

His face darkened. He had gone a little grey with the passing years, but he had retained much of his old slimness of figure and his face had lost none of its lively expressiveness.

"I fear not long," he said. "To tell the truth, Miss Woodhouse —Emma—Randalls is no place for a worldly fellow like myself to

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feel easy in. The only comforts my stepmother acknowledges are those of religion. But I should not speak so of one who is your dear friend."

It occurred to Emma that he had probably already ascertained that she and Mrs. Weston no longer remained on the terms of intimacy that once had existed between them.

She said, "Alas, Mrs. Weston is much changed from what she was when your father lived, certainly."

"True," he agreed, encouraged by her response. "I fear she is so taken up with the joys of the next world that she has quite forgotten that one may be comfortable in this without mortal sin."

"Or even with," said Emma. "So you will not stay long at Randalls?"

A new voice cut into the conversation.

"I have assured Mr. Churchill that, should he desire to extend his stay in Highbury with greater convenience, Mr. E and I will be delighted to put him up at the vicarage."

It was Mrs. Elton, exercising her imagined prerogative as hostess to interrupt.

Emma smiled at her and said, "I fear that that would be merely to exchange the deficiencies of one religion for another. Pray, do not be offended, Mrs. Elton. I merely mean that Mr. Churchill has been telling me how much he regrets that his stepmother keeps no stable, and I know that your good husband and yourself have no need of more than Betsy, your old brown cob. But a gentleman must have his horses, so I have invited Mr. Churchill to come to Hartfield when he has finished his visit at Randalls and enjoy the run of my husband's stables. They are quite the best in the county, I do believe."

"So they are," said Mrs. Elton acidly. "Mr. K is a fine judge of horseflesh at least. There is a trifle of supper laid out in the dining-room. Mr. Churchill, if you would like to lead the way."

"Willingly," said Frank Churchill.

He reached for Emma's arm, but hesitated when he saw his hostess's arm proffered to him. Then with a smile he said, "I shall be delighted to try your husband's mounts, Mrs. Knightley. Thank you."

And led the slightly mollified Mrs. Elton in to supper.

Less than a week later (and it was thought a credit to his good nature that he endured Randalls so long), Frank Churchill took up residence at Hartfield.

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Knightley, who had never cared for Churchill in the old days, was soon won to a change of opinion by the younger man's enthusiasm for hunting which almost matched his own.

"Says I've got the best string of horses he's seen anywhere in the county," he told Emma complacently. "Matured into a man of judgment, that young fellow. Always knew he would once he settled down."

Churchill for his part was even more struck by the alteration in Knightley, though he would never have ventured to speak openly of it without Emma's encouragement.

"Knightley feels you are much improved from what you used to be," she told him when they were alone one day.

"I'm flattered, I think," he answered with a smile.

"And what think you of Knightley? Is he not much improved, too?"

"He is certainly more—weighty," said Churchill, glancing at his hostess anxiously, in case his witticism offended.

Emma laughed. "You have a keen eye!"

Encouraged, Churchill continued.

"And yet he is less weighty, too! He was such a fearsome fellow to us young scallywags in the old days. I was always afraid he was about to lecture me on my ill manners, or my lightness of thought, or my flimsy morals! Now, though he is as firm as ever in his opinions on all matters of note, yet he is no firmer than any county gentleman might be expected to be who has received his father's notions, and his notions before him, without feeling any need to submit them to the test of his own reason!"

He paused, fearful once more he might have spoken too boldly, but Emma offered no reprimand of word or look and he went on, "On judgment of horses and wine-shippers alone does he show any of that true moral passion which once informed his very cough!"

"In short, Mr. Churchill, you feel my husband has changed from a variety of preaching prig into a type of toping centaur!"

Frank Churchill was truly shocked to hear Emma speak so freely, though what she said expressed his feelings precisely. And with the shock came another more pleasurable feeling of sensuous complicity in the closeness implied by her openness with him.

"Emma," he said, taking a step towards her.

But before that small step could be followed by a second much greater one, the door burst open and a maid rushed in, crying, "Madam! madam! come at once. It's your father, madam! The old gentleman is close to dying . . . !"

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For forty years at least, Mr. Woodhouse had seemed so close to dying that his actual and necessary approach to that condition had passed almost unnoticed. Now at last, to Emma's horror, he had taken a positive step.

He had suddenly cried out, half risen, then fallen back into his chair unconscious. By the time Mr. Perry, the apothecary, arrived, he had recovered consciousness but was unable to speak or move his limbs.

Mr. Perry diagnosed a seizure, spoke learnedly of a sudden rush of blood to the head, and called for a bowl and towel so that he could open a vein. Emma, looking down at the pale skinny frame of her father, thought to herself that he looked to be suffering more from a lack of blood than an excess of it, but Mr. Perry had been treating the old man for many decades now, and for once she was ready to bow to expert judgment.

Frank Churchill, however, whose adoptive father had died of the same cause (which he suspected to be excessive bleeding as much as the seizure itself), urged caution; and Perry, who was an intelligent, gentlemanlike man, prepared to admit (to himself at least) that many of his treatments owed more to custom than to knowledge, readily put up his knife, and prescribed stillness and warmth instead.

At this point the front door of the house burst open and footsteps were heard making up the stairs. It was Knightley, who had been out riding while all the excitement took place. Apprised of the events by the groom who took his horse, he now burst into the bedroom and cried, "What? Is the old man dead?"

To Emma there seemed more of eager expectation than grief in his voice, though a moment's thought would have told her that her father's death could be as little welcome to Knightley as to herself. But she did not spare the moment, and replied angrily, "No, sir, he is not dead, though he is like to be if such a noise as you make further disturbs his poor mind. This is not a stable yard, sir, nor a taproom!"

Discomfited, Knightley stammered, "No, Emma, I only meant—" and retreated before her angry gaze.

Within twenty-four hours, Mr. Woodhouse recovered his speech, though it remained slow and somewhat indistinct. And over the next few days his power of movement returned fully to his left side, though his right was still partially paralysed.

These recoveries Emma credited as much to Frank Churchill as

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to Mr. Perry. In many ways, the gratitude of a beautiful woman is more dangerous to a man than her love, for love can be irrational, while gratitude, being based on reasonable cause, makes him think the better of himself, and for a man it is always self-importance that lines the bottom of a dangerous liaison.

Emma was delighted with her father's progress. Curiously, the old man, after a lifetime of alarums and crises based on such inconsequentials as sitting in a draught, rising too early or too late, overexertion by walking, too rich a diet, too lively a company, too long a supper, or too short an afternoon nap, seemed to treat this very real ailment as a trivial and temporary inconvenience. Emma was ready to be encouraged by this to hope for a complete recovery, but Mr. Perry was far less sanguine. Fearful of approaching Emma direct, and distrusting Knightley's ability to be a gentler bearer of bad news than himself, he decided to confide in Frank Churchill. What he had to say chimed perfectly with Churchill's own knowledge of the subject. At Mr. Woodhouse's age, such a seizure as this was almost invariably the precursor of a more severe attack. It might come in days, it would certainly come in months, and it would beyond all reasonable doubt be fatal.

Churchill passed a sleepless night uncertain of his best course of action. Should Emma be prepared for the worst, or should she be permitted to enjoy her father's few remaining weeks in the bliss of ignorance? He had almost decided for the latter course when he rose next morning and rode down to Highbury to see Lawyer Coxe on a matter connected with Randalls. Though left wealthy by his adoptive parents, Frank Churchill had neglected his investments in the years immediately following Jane's death and had suffered considerable losses. He had retained enough to live on, but not to be careless with, and he had been distressed to see the dilapidated state into which Mrs. Weston was allowing his future inheritance to fall. His stepmother had been unmoved by his suggestions for repair and he had consulted Coxe to see what might be done to force her to maintain the property.

Coxe's researches had been fruitless. Nothing could be done.

"Except perhaps if you, sir, would care to invest a little of your own money."

"What do you mean?" inquired Churchill.

"It might be possible to persuade Mrs. Weston to convert, let us say, the old stables into a Roman Catholic chapel. Once on the

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premises, the constructors could at your expense, and unbeknown to Mrs. Weston, examine and make good any large defects in the main building."

Coxe's subtle, complexity-loving mind was delighted with the scheme, but Churchill was less enthusiastic.

"It smacks too much of subterfuge," he said. "Besides, what should I want with a house that has a Romish chapel and no stable?"

"In architecture at least, apostasy is as easy as conversion," said Coxe. "And it is better than having no house at all, as is like to be the case if Mrs. Weston's neglect continues. Poor Highbury! Randalls crumbling, Hartfield like to follow, what sad days have I lived to see!"

"Hartfield? What say you of Hartfield?"

Mr. Coxe had said too much, but was soon persuaded, under oaths of secrecy, to say more, and Randalls was completely forgotten as Churchill rode back to Hartfield.

His agitation was so great that he confronted Emma directly with a demand to know the truth of the matter and, after an initial anger at Coxe's indiscretion, she replied as frankly.

"So it is true," said Churchill. "With your father's death, Hartfield, and all that goes with it, must be sold to pay your husband's debts. Monstrous! Monstrous!"

"It is monstrous indeed, Mr. Churchill, but a monster not to be feared yet awhile. My father mends daily and, who knows? He may yet live another twenty years."

She laughed gaily, and he understood her laughter was a prayer. He tried to laugh with her, or at least to smile, but it was an effort hard to make, for he found his dilemma increased tenfold. To tell her the truth of her father's condition now would not be merely to deprive her of the hope of years of life for a beloved parent. It would also be to tell that by the year's end she could be homeless and penniless.

This agony of decision had better be endured in private. But before he could excuse himself, Emma spoke.

"Mr. Churchill," she said, "you're strangely rapt. What is it that so moves you?"

He had forgotten how perceptive of reaction, how sensitive of nuance she was.

"Emma," he said, "will you not call me Frank?"

"If you will be frank, that is what I shall call you," she rejoined. "So tell me why you seem so troubled."

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There was nothing else for it. He told her.

"I am no apothecary, you understand," he concluded. "I speak but from observation."

"And you have discussed this with Perry, too?"

He admitted as much.

"There are other physicians," she said.

He never admired her as much as this moment. Knowing the turbulence of emotion that must be raging through her breast, he looked in vain for any sign of it on her face or in her voice and could find none, except perhaps a little not unbecoming pallor around the eyes.

There *were* other physicians. She consulted them discreetly, and even contrived to have one of them examine her father under pretence of visiting Hartfield to look at a gelding her husband wished to sell.

They confirmed unanimously Perry's judgment that this present seizure was but a harbinger of a much larger attack, almost certain to be fatal in a man of Mr. Woodhouse's years and constitution. There was some disagreement on timing, but not a one of them would stake his professional reputation beyond six months.

Poor Emma wept, but she wept alone, and only Churchill guessed at the agony of spirit in which she passed the next few days. Such nobility confirmed him in his next move. He had already at the time of revelation of Mr. Woodhouse's true condition been moved to recognize in himself a deep, almost worshipping love for Emma. Now he knew that come what may, he had to tell it. If she repulsed him, then that was merely the end of his own worthless life; but if, even in the repulse, there was the slightest sign that her awareness of inspiring such a deep, unselfish love might bring one iota of comfort to her wounded soul, then the sacrifice was well worthwhile.

He spoke. She was astounded.

"Mr. Churchill—how can you speak so? You are a guest in our house—you alone know my present unhappiness. This is not the act of a gentleman, let alone a friend!"

Horribly chastened, he yet did not withdraw.

"Emma, forgive me. It is my care for you as much as my passion that makes me speak. How shall I bear to think of you orphaned, friendless, in poverty? Emma, I cannot provide against the loss of your dear father, but friendship I can supply; and what I have of wealth is yours to dispose of. Emma, I beg you, let me help."

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"You are too familiar, sir," she said angrily. "You overreach yourself!"

"Emma!" he said, reproved. "Miss Woodhouse—"

"*Mrs. Knightley*, sir!" she cried. "You forget. I have a husband."

And she strode magnificently from the room.

It is not to be imagined that Knightley was so far removed from the realities of life as to be unconcerned about the future. At the moment his debts were huge and, with the punitive interest thereon, steadily mounting. But with the greater part of the latest (and so far as the security of the Hartfield estate was concerned, the last) post-obit advance still in his hands, plus his income from Donwell Abbey, he was for the moment comfortable enough. But old Mr. Woodhouse's seizure had been a nasty jolt to his spirits. Like all who knew him well, he, too, had come to consider his father-in-law would live forever, and had indulged in some self-congratulatory mirth at the way in which he believed he had deceived the money-lenders.

Now suddenly the old man had showed he was mortal man.

The consequences of his death were unavoidable and Knightley now faced up to them for the first time. Hartfield must go in its entirety, house, land, stables, horses, everything. There was no avoiding it. All that would remain to him of this, the crowning glory of Highbury, was its fairest jewel, Emma.

It was small consolation. He could not think of his wife without anger. He compared himself now with what he had been twenty years before. *Then* he had been rich and respected, a fine figure of a man in the prime of life, dignified of mien, weighty of speech, sage and serious, the acknowledged exemplar of all the best qualities which went into the composition of an English country gentleman.

Now (suddenly the last infirmity of despair, which is honesty, was upon him) he was fat, corpulent, *gross*; a toper, a sot, a grotesque gourmandizer, who thought more of his horses than his human household, neglected his duties both public and private, and was, all in all, a laughing-stock throughout the county.

And what was the significant, the catalysing difference between himself twenty years ago and himself now?

Marriage!

He had married a vain, posturing, empty-headed girl nearly twenty years younger than himself in the arrogant belief that he

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could influence her development, and alter her make-up, to fit his mould. Yet how had they started?

By the abandonment of his own elegant county seat, Donwell Abbey, to set up house here at Hartfield in order not to fret or inconvenience old Mr. Woodhouse!

And later, whose voice had it been that urged upon him the propriety, the advantage, the *necessity* of admitting the John Knightleys into Donwell? Emma's, of course! Talking of the needs of her dear sister, the care and comfort of her dear nephews and nieces! Thus had he admitted his own brother, that cold, calculating, subtle Cain of a brother, into a situation to which he had no rights and few expectations.

"I have sold my birthright for a mess of potage!" proclaimed Knightley, whose Christian thoughts turned more easily to the violence of the Old Testament than to the gentler virtues of the New.

So he sat, tracing the course of his decline over two decades, and every downward step seemed to have been carved out for him by Emma.

By the time he had finished his tragic autobiography (and his third bottle of port) he felt it almost as a consoling justice that his wife was going to lose forever her beloved Hartfield.

But if that were just, then even juster would it be for himself to regain Donwell, and this was what he now set his mind to.

It was, or had been, a steady mind, and a clear mind, but even before it was corroded by port wine and shaken out of its foundings by the bumping jog of a horse, it had never had the cold sharp edge of John Knightley's. John had long been aware of the extent of his brother's borrowings. In fairness, if there had been anything he could have done either by word or deed to stay the sad decline, he would have spoken or acted. But judging rightly that no interference of his would be allowed to influence events, he had looked ahead to their necessary conclusion and set about preparing his defences accordingly.

The outcome was inevitable. Soon Lawyer Coxe had to admit defeat to George Knightley. His brother was as firmly fixed at Donwell Abbey as if he were there by right of primogeniture. The very best that Coxe could hope for was to establish his client's right to a share in the occupation of a house which he had once possessed with a clear and undeniable title.

Donwell was a large mansion, but John Knightley had a large family, and also little desire to have a drunken brother and a sister-

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in-law he had never cared for living under the same roof. For the first time he spoke to his wife of these matters. Isabella, who had come to accept the gaining of Donwell as a fair compensation for the loss of her share in Hartfield, at once flew into a rage at the thought that her father's estate had been lost entirely to the moneylenders to pay for her brother-in-law's pleasures. This eventually died, to be replaced immediately by an even greater one at the prospect of the George Knightleys coming to live at Donwell.

Her husband let her anger die. His wife's occasional emotional outbursts were a price he had been always ready to pay for her undisputed intellectual subordination.

"Be still, wife," he said finally. "We cannot have George and Emma to live at Donwell, there is no argument about that. But we are obliged by strong arguments of law, family tie, and public reputation to see they are not destitute. There is a cottage on the estate out beyond Langham, a very decent kind of little house, which, with a bit of attention to the roof, will do very nicely for a childless couple with a single maid, no horses, and small inclination to entertain. My brother and his wife might live there very comfortably on his allowance from the estate revenues and we should still be able to maintain easily all that pleasant intercourse which the bonds of blood make necessary to us both."

As this pleasant intercourse had been reduced in recent years to an exchange of visits every sixmonth, it did indeed seem that it would be easy to maintain. It was true that Mr. Woodhouse's illness had caused a more frequent communion between the sisters, but Isabella's strong hint that their father's seizure might have been accelerated by worry and neglect had not brought them any closer together.

So it was that John and Isabella together drove down to Hartfield to say in a friendly, familial kind of way what Laywer Coxe was already transcribing into the cold convolutions of legal English.

They did not find George at home. Urgent business of state had required his presence in London. Emma received them with a courtesy whose chilliness hardly showed.

John Knightley for his part was all fraternal concern, and Isabella all sisterly condescension. Emma received their proposal with smiling calmness. And as the sisters parted (John having gone ahead), Isabella's sense of the totality of her triumph was so strong that there were genuine tears of affection in her eyes as she embraced

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Emma and said, "Papa looks so well, sister, that he may, God willing, live for many years yet, and so delay this unhappy day. Forgive me if my concern for him made me so forget myself that I ever hinted a fear that he was not receiving the best of treatment here. I know now what I did not know then, that you have cause even greater than a daughter's love to cherish his dear health."

"Sister, you are a great comfort to me," said Emma.

The tears flowed faster and Isabella said, "And, sister, the best news I have still to give. It may be yet that Hartfield is not to be lost to our family."

"What's this?" cried Emma, sudden hope filling her heart.

"John has already spoken to Mr. Coxe. Our private investments have flourished these past years, and when Hartfield finally comes on the market to pay George's debts, it may be possible for John himself to purchase the house at least, and some of the estate also."

"This is good news indeed, sister," said Emma, suddenly full of shame for the hard thoughts she had entertained of the John Knightleys. It would not be pleasant to live as the object of her sister's charity, but it would be infinitely preferable to living in a cottage at Langham! "Oh, good news indeed!"

But if John purposed to buy Hartfield, what need had there been to mention Langham at all? she wondered.

"Yes," she was saying, "such a nice girl, and though she has only twenty thousand, her breeding is such that we cannot doubt that she will make an excellent wife for Henry, and mistress of Hartfield."

"Mistress of Hartfield!" echoed Emma. "Sister, forgive me, of whom do you speak."

"Emma, do you grow deaf?" said Isabella tartly. "I speak of Miss Augusta Otway, of course, who is to marry your nephew, Henry, and, if all goes well with the purchase, to set up house with him here at Hartfield!"

The shock was so great that Emma could not speak, and Isabella, happy to fill any silence with her own chatter, was able to depart in complete ignorance of the violent changes of feeling to which her sister had been subjected in the past half-hour.

Once alone, however, Emma gave vent to her pent-up feelings and raged around the room, restrained only from screaming aloud and hurling articles at the wall by her remembrance of her convalescent father upstairs. But her mind was tempestuous.

"First Donwell—now Hartfield—to take all—give it to that bumptious boy—Miss Augusta Otway—empty-headed ninny—cottage at

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Langham—daily visits—nothing changed—oh, the hypocrisy! —private investments—liar, cheat—Donwell revenues—oh, for money!—or someone with money—money enough to buy Hartfield when the time comes and keep it from those prating hypocrites—*anything*, I would give *anything!*"

The door opened and Frank Churchill came into the room.

Do not judge Emma too harshly. Distressed beyond all tolerance, all reason, all control, betrayed by those nearest to her, a debauched husband and a disingenuous sister, praying to God for deliverance at any price; and the door opens . . .

They were alone in the house. Frank Churchill saw her distress and came naturally to comfort her. She saw the light of his loving concern in his eyes and let herself be comforted. By what small degrees they moved from comfort to caress, the reader must judge for himself. What resistance, what persuasion, what interchange of vows more sacred than those of church or state, what soft endearments, what gentle pressing, what warm yielding; all these are for the reader to imagine at whatever speed, of whatever proportion, and in whatever detail best befits his conscience. Suffice it to say that Emma bestowed on Churchill what she had not bestowed on any man save her husband, and not on him for many years, and Frank Churchill felt himself blessed in the bestowal.

In that gentle aftermath, where pleasure is still more than a memory and guilt still less than vapour, Emma murmured, "Frank, do you truly love me?"

"More than anything. More than life even. Ask what you will, I shall provide it."

Emma said, "What shall I ask? What do I require? Nothing! Except—"

"Except? Ask anything, dear heart."

"Dear *heart*, you say? Let that be my cue. Heart—hart—Hartfield! That is all I ask."

"What?"

Churchill's surprise penetrated Emma's languor.

"Do not misunderstand, my love," she said urgently. "I do not mean as a gift. Do not believe that I would ask for such a gift, or any gift at all. To ask for *anything* would be the action of a—"

She let her voice fade into an indignant silence.

Churchill said, "Emma, my love, ask me anything I can give, and you shall have it with no one daring to make such an imputation. What? You are above reproach! But what is it you say of Hartfield?"

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"All I mean, dear Frank, is, could you not buy Hartfield for yourself? A man of your wealth and standing needs an estate. Randalls is well enough, but like to be a ruin by the time poor Mrs. Weston passes on. Whereas Hartfield is fit for any gentleman, and must be sold if my dear father dies. I would rather it passed into your hands than anyone else's in the world! And it would mean you would still be close by when—when—"

"When what?"

In tears, she told him of John Knightley's proposal for their accommodation after Hartfield was sold.

Churchill's indignation was great.

"Has the man no soul to make such a proposition?" he thundered. "And your own sister, too—oh, monstrous! Dear heart, I swear that if I had the means at my disposal, you should not lose Hartfield, no, not if it meant I had to rent it out to Knightley for a peppercorn!"

Out of all these fine and heartfelt emotions, Emma dextrously plucked the only significant word.

"You say 'if,' my love—"

With genuine disappointment, but without shame, for he was in no way conscious of having deceived her, Churchill confessed how small his fortune was, how little of financial assistance he could offer to help her retain Hartfield.

With magnificent restraint, Emma began to rearrange her dishevelled clothing, resisting his attempts to delay her by pointing out it was time she took tea with her father. Her thoughts as she climbed the stairs were a bitter turmoil, but nothing of this showed as she greeted old Mr. Woodhouse with a bright smile.

"How are you, Papa?" she asked gaily. "Hannah will be here shortly with the tray and afterwards we will play a game of backgammon."

The old man's mouth opened and shut but no words came. She approached close, took his hand, and raised it to her cheek. Still he did not speak. Alarmed, she released the hand. It fell, resistless, onto the counterpane.

"Papa!" she cried. *"Papa!"*

It was bad, but not the worst. Perry, quickly summoned, confirmed there had been a second seizure, but by no means as severe as he had feared.

"However—" he said.

"Speak freely, Mr. Perry," Emma urged.

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"Forgive me if I do, Mrs. Knightley. Weakened as he is now, a third seizure would certainly be fatal."

"And is a third likely?"

"Almost inevitable, I fear, dear lady. And it may not be long delayed. Forgive me for giving such news!"

Emma took the blow well. Isabella was summoned to weep; the Reverend Elton was called to pray. By midnight, however, Mr. Woodhouse was a little better, and took a little gruel before falling into a peaceful sleep. The vicar went to continue his prayers in the vicarage, Isabella took her tears back to Donwell, and Emma went up to her lonely bedroom where at last she could give way completely to her grief. The future looked blacker than she had ever known it. For the first time in her life she contemplated her own death. Would it not be best for everyone if she were to follow her dear father quickly into that abyss?

When her dark musings were interrupted by a tapping at her door, and to her whispered call, "Who's there?" came the whispered reply, "Frank," her first reaction was of outrage.

Then she took thought, and after a while she opened the door and said softly, "Come in."

Once more, old Mr. Woodhouse amazed everyone by the strength of his constitution. Once more, albeit more slowly this time, speech returned and paralysis departed, but the end now seemed certain, and soon.

Knightley returned from London, shook his head in perplexity at the sight of his stricken father-in-law, whose frail figure was all that lay between him and ruin, and went back to London to pursue whatever affairs of state occupied him there.

That night, Frank Churchill came to Emma's room again as was now his accepted practice, though Emma and his own conscience insisted on complete discretion. She seemed strangely distant, and after a while he asked if anything ailed her.

To his amazement, and also his exulting hope, she replied, "I spoke to Knightley of a separation today."

"What did he answer?" he asked.

"What do you imagine? He laughed, and said God had bound us, and only God could untie us. I asked him if he spoke of divorce."

Churchill's hopes leapt even higher. Divorce was difficult but not altogether impossible, if both parties were energetic in its pursuit.

He said. "And what said he to that?"

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"He laughed even louder, and said no, it was not divorce he meant, but death. That was the only instrument he recognized to untie God's knot. Frank, I must see you no more!"

"No more?"

Now hope had gone and only shock remained.

"What do you say? Why should we cease our encounters?" he demanded.

"While I thought there was hope that we might one day be legitimately joined, I could ease my conscience," she replied passionately. "But now I know that there is no hope, I see this relationship for the sinful thing it is. We must part and see each other no more! No, Frank, do not plead or protest. My mind is firm. Go now, dear one. Go at once. And God bless you!"

And Frank Churchill found himself outside in the cold corridor, the sound of a bolt sliding home behind him with all the finality of the iron bar which signals to a prisoner that his life-sentence has begun.

That night he sat up long in a desperate speculation as to what his future might be, and before dawn arrived, he had left Hartfield and ridden away into the paling shadows.

The following night George Knightley was preparing for bed. He whistled quietly to himself as he did so, the tune of an old hunting song. He had discovered in himself of late a great capacity to live for the present pleasure, and let the future look after itself. Today had been a good day. He had spoken well in the House and won the applause of his Party's leaders. He had come back to his other Westminster house in the evening, and found the wanton Lady Upton waiting for him. They had shared a supper of cold pie and claret, and much else besides. Finally she had departed, promising him to return the following night.

He finished off a half-empty bottle of wine and thought complacently of his performance. For a man of his age and his corpulence, he was wonderfully lissome. It was this unexpected combination which so attracted Lady Upton, she had told him. It was a shame a man so vital should not have gotten an heir on his own wife. That would have solved some of his problems perhaps, in giving him a clear and continuous title to Donwell. But it was too late now. Or perhaps not. Emma at forty was still a beautiful and vigorous woman. What a jolt it would be to his sanctimonious brother and

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that awful babbling wife of his, not to mention that moon-faced oaf, his nephew Henry!

Perhaps the future was not as dark as it seemed.

He finished the wine, nibbled a few crumbs of pastry from the half-eaten pie, yawned, and went to bed.

Soon he slept.

A sound woke him.

His bedroom door was ajar and he knew he had closed it. A figure stood by his bed. He tried to struggle upright, but the sheets seemed to bind him tight.

Outside a cloud was blown away from the moon and its bright light fell straight through the half-curtained casement, illuminating the intruder's figure.

The first thing that struck Knightley was that the intruder held a large wedge of veal pie in his hand.

Then he raised his eyes to the man's face.

"You!" he said in amazement.

He would have spoken more, but there was no more time to speak. Into his open mouth the intruder pushed the wedge of pie and leaned all his weight on it, thrusting it deep, deep down. Knightley choked and struggled, but the tight-stretched sheets held his huge body supine with his arms pinned tight by his sides. After a while, the cloud blew back over the moon, or so it seemed, for darkness came drifting down through the fading casement.

The news came first to Lawyer Coxe, who took it straight to Donwell Abbey. Pale and serious-faced, John Knightley and Isabella drove quickly down to Hartfield.

"Why, sister, I was not expecting you today," said Emma. "And brother John! Is it about some new cottage you have found for my occupation?"

"Emma, be strong," urged Isabella. "We bring sad tidings."

"What? Must I make do with a barn, perhaps? Or even a byre!"

"Sister-in-law, be still and listen," commanded John Knightley. "Your husband, and my brother, George Knightley—"

"Yes, yes. I know him."

"He is dead. Emma, George is dead."

"Good lord," said Emma. "George dead, you say?"

She sat very still, completely expressionless.

"How dead?" she asked finally.

"He—he choked," said John Knightley.

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"Choked!"

"On a piece of pie," interposed Isabella. "He had been drinking wine with his supper, and eating a veal pie. He must have taken some to bed with him and continued to eat it as he lay there."

"What a remarkable thing," said Emma. "Choked, you say? On a veal pie. What a remarkable thing."

"Emma, let your grief come out," urged John. "Do not hold it back. Such retention is—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a horse ridden at speed to the front door.

"That is probably Mr. Perry," said Emma, rising. "I sent for him. Forgive me. I will ask him to wait."

"But why have you sent for Perry?" cried Isabella. "Is Father—"

But Emma had left the room.

It was not, however, Perry, but Frank Churchill that the maid was opening the door to. He had a wild pale look, with his hair and clothes somewhat dishevelled, like a man who had not slept much, but ridden fast and far.

"Will you step into the library, Mr. Churchill?" said Emma, leading the way. "Forgive me if I can give you little of my time today. I have just received distressing news. My husband—"

"'—is dead!' " Churchill concluded for her.

"News travels fast! You have heard?" she said.

"Heard?" he cried. "I was—"

His words tailed off, then he resumed a quieter tone. "Yes, Emma. I have heard, and I have come post haste. Oh, my Emma! I know that in the eyes of others you must put on a show of grief, but for us what a different emotion this news must rouse!"

"Mr. Churchill, I do not understand your meaning," said Emma.

"Emma! He's dead! George is dead! Now we may be together and none can say us no! I can take care of you as you deserve; despite my losses, I have wealth enough to keep you comfortable, dear, dear Emma!"

"Comfortable!" Emma laughed gently. "Oh, I see your meaning. You are concerned for my comforts now I am a widow. Rest assured, dear Mr. Churchill. There is no cause for concern. Did you not know that with my husband's death while my father still lives, all debts are cancelled, and Hartfield remains safe? But none the less I thank you for your solicitude."

"Emma, what are you saying?" demanded Churchill. "I am offering my heart. I am asking your hand in marriage."

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"Marriage? With my widowhood a matter of hours barely, of minutes only in my knowledge? Fie, Mr. Churchill, what are you thinking of?" reproached Emma coldly. "Besides, did you not understand me? Hartfield is safe. Now that I have Hartfield, what should I want with another husband?"

There was the sound of another horse approaching.

Emma said, "That will, I think, be Mr. Perry. Perhaps you could admit him on your way out, Mr. Churchill, and ask him to wait. Forgive me if I am short with you. You understand, there is much for me to do. Goodbye."

Leaving the haggard, stricken figure behind her, she returned to the drawing-room.

"I'm sorry to have left you," she said to the couple waiting there. "It was not, in fact, Mr. Perry, but Mr. Frank Churchill, come post haste to offer his condolences. A truly gentlemanly act, I think. Perry has arrived now, I believe, but I have asked him to wait till we shall have finished our business."

"Sister!" cried Isabella. "Why have you sent for Perry? Papa is not worse, I hope?"

"No, indeed," said Emma. "Papa, in fact, is much better this morning. I shall keep the sad news of Knightley's death from him a little while, I believe, till he grows strong enough to receive it."

"Then, what of Perry?"

"Perry? Oh, yes. I must admit I have summoned Perry here on my own account."

"Emma! You are not ill, my sweet?"

Isabella moved forward, all concern, and John Knightley plucked a cushion from a chair, though what he hoped to do with it was not clear.

"Not ill exactly, Bella," said Emma, smiling coyly. "Is it not strange how Providence arranges things? On this very day that you bring me this tragic news about George, I have summoned Perry to confirm good news, which is also about George in a way. Oh, fate is strange!"

"What do you mean, Emma?" cried Isabella, now alarmed far beyond mere concern for her sister's or father's health.

"I mean that I believe; no, I mean I am *sure* that I am, if you will forgive the phrase, brother-in-law, *enceinte*. I am with child, dear Bella. Knightley is dead, the poor, dear man. But his name will live on, his *full* name, if, as I hope, pray, and begin to feel, it is a boy!"

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And now John Knightley began to look as if at last he had decided what he would like to do with the cushion.

Emma Knightley, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, with a much loved elderly father and an adorable, strappingly healthy son, seems to unite some of the best blessings of existence and appears preordained to pass her remaining years in the world with very little to distress and vex her.

DETECTIVERSE

LOSER WEEPER

by PHYLLIS WHITE

I met a lovely lady down at the mall one day
And as we chatted, "Look," she said: and there it lay.
To lose a thousand dollars is such a dreadful shame,
And there was nothing with it to show the owner's name.
She said: "Well, finders keepers, and since you found it, too,
If you'll just show good faith, then half belongs to you."
"I'll gladly show good faith," I said, "but you are much too kind—
Let's do just what I always do with anything I find.
We'll take it to that officer who's standing over there."
Then somehow we lost contact—she went I don't know where.
She was as nice a lady as anyone I knew.
The officer said: "Yes, ma'am. I'd like to meet her, too."

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

It's rare to have the chance to review two new books by a single author in one column. It's even rarer if they are entries in two different popular series, one of which has developed a cult following of movie and private-eye buffs and the other an Edgar Award winner for its believable depiction of a culture far removed and quite different from Forties' Hollywood. In the series about Toby Peters and Porfiry Petrovich Rostnikov, Stuart M. Kaminsky has proven himself one of the mystery field's most versatile practitioners.

*** Stuart M. Kaminksy: *The Man Who Walked Like a Bear,* Scribners, $16.95. In the sixth case for Inspector Rostnikov, and the first since the Edgar-winning *A Cold Red Sunrise,* the veteran Moscow cop is visiting his wife Sarah, who is recovering from brain surgery, when a naked madman invades the hospital ward. The incident sets in motion a complicated plot with varied elements that may or may not be connected, including a vanished bus (with driver) and a plot against a Politburo member. Rostnikov and his police colleagues, from Colonel Snitkonoy, the Gray Wolfhound, on down, are always enjoyable company.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Poor Butterfly,* Mysterious, $17.95. In 1942 San Francisco, Toby Peters is hired to ferret out threats to a production of *Madame Butterfly,* which some oppose as pro-Japanese, and confronts a latter-day version of Erik, the Phantom of the Opera. There are fewer real people in the cast than usual, though conductor Leopold Stokowski is the client. The novel has the frantic action of a Forties' comedy-mystery movie or perhaps a novel by Phoebe Atwood Taylor. (The one historical figure I felt sure would turn up in a mystery with a Forties' San Francisco opera background, alas, never does.)

*** Elliott Roosevelt: *Murder in the Blue Room,* St. Martin's, $16.95. The latest in another enjoyable period series occurs in the same year as the newest Peters: 1942. A White House secretary is found murdered during a secret visit by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt again turns detective. There's a traditional gathering-of-the-suspects finale to delight fans of Wolfe, Chan, and the Thin Man, and one of the key axioms of murderer-spotting can be successfully applied. The series grows on me, but I found one unbelievable note: while I realize a sizable portion of the American public hated FDR, I cannot believe a nationally sponsored radio commentator could have gotten away with calling him "Presy-diddle Rosenglooby" on the air.

*** Susan Dunlap: *Diamond in the Buff,* St. Martin's, $14.95. The series about Berkeley cop Jill Smith is reliable for sharp writing, care-

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ful plotting, and good character interplay, and the story of warring neighbors Hasbrouck Diamond (a litigious dentist) and Leila Sandoval (a Telegraph Avenue foot masseuse) upholds the tradition. Dunlap has a special knack for presenting an oddball cast, off-trail motives, and intriguing background facts from fields as varied as mountaineering and tree lore.

*** Robert Irvine: *Gone to Glory,* St. Martin's, $16.95. Utah private eye Moroni Traveler is hired to help his boyhood hero Pepper Dalton, good-field no-hit shortstop of the old Salt Lake City Bees, accused of murdering his sister over the disposition of an old mining town they have inherited. This is another good entry in a strong series, rich in character insight and telling details of its church-dominated region. It also ranks high among baseball mysteries, recognizing that the minor leagues can be at least as interesting a background as the majors.

*** Margery Allingham: *The Return of Mr. Campion: Uncollected Stories,* St. Martin's, $15.95. Allingham was one of the masters of Golden Age detective fiction, and all her stories should be available, including this mixed bag of leftovers. Of the thirteen entries, only six concern Campion, including the script of a 1935 BBC lecture and a comic piece called "What To Do with an Ageing Detective." The biographical introduction and story notes by J. E. Morpurgo are often more interesting than the tales themselves—see, for example, his ingenious detective work in dating the writing of a non-mystery called "The Beauty King."

Original mystery anthologies, once rare, have become more and more plentiful in recent years. One of the most recent is *New Crimes* (Carroll & Graf, $16.95), edited by Maxim Jakubowski. A phenomenon of original anthologies you might expect is the occasional appearance of inferior stories by major names—e.g., the somewhat hackneyed fantasy by Peter Lovesey here. But more interesting and less expected is the incidence of entries by crime writers that are not really crime stories at all—for example, James Crumley's nonfiction-style movie-making tale, "The Heavy." The Crumley story is technically not an original, having seen previous (if obscure) publication, as have John LeCarré's short filmscript, "George Smiley Goes Home," Sara Paretsky's perpetual V. I. Warshawski reprint "The Peitro Andromache," a story by Mike Ripley, and a couple of "vintage" entries by Cornell Woolrich and David Goodis.

But the other fifteen stories are new, with a specialty in offbeat short-shorts by authors like Andrew Vachss, Michael Z. Lewin, and Bill Pronzini. Slightly longer are Ed Gorman's neat "Prisoners" (you may get one part of the surprise ending but probably not both) and M. J. Trow's "It's Clever, But Is It Art?"—a con-game tale featuring Inspector Lestrade, the Sherlock Holmes associate Trow has featured in a series of novels, most not published in the United States.

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Another anthology of more than passing interest is the Mystery Writers of America's *The New Edgar Winners* (Wynwood, $17.95), edited by Martin H. Greenberg with an Introduction by Donald E. Westlake. The ten stories are the Edgar recipients for best short stories of 1979 through 1988. The winners are a varied and talented list: Geoffrey Norman, Clark Howard, Jack Ritchie, Frederick Forsyth, Ruth Rendell, Lawrence Block, John Lutz, Robert Sampson, Harlan Ellison, and Bill Crenshaw. Three of the winning tales were first published in *EQMM*, two more in *AHMM*. Appended is a list of all Edgar winners and nominees in adult-fiction categories through 1988.

Stories (plus a song lyric and two one-act plays) with TV, radio, screen, or stage connections are gathered in the latest *EQMM* anthology, *Ellery Queen's More Murder on Cue* (Walker, $19.95), edited by Eleanor Sullivan. (The volume was previously published in paperback as *Ellery Queen's More Media Favorites*.) Though several of the entries are quite familiar—e.g., Thomas Burke's "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole," John Collier's "Back for Christmas," and the short-story version of Marie Belloc Lowndes' "The Lodger"—others are familiar with a twist: Lucille Fletcher's multi-media success "Sorry, Wrong Number" appears in its stage version, and John Dickson Carr's "The Gentleman from Paris" includes the learned EQ Editor's Note that accompanied its original publication.

Speaking of Carr, with all the biographical and critical volumes on individual mystery writers to appear in the past couple of decades, it's amazing that the occupant of this Jury Box for several years and the all-time master of the locked-room mystery has until recently been overlooked. S. T. Joshi's *John Dickson Carr: A Critical Study* (Bowling Green University Popular Press, $34.95 cloth, $16.95 paper) is the first book on Carr, and a good one, with knowledgeable comments on his characters, plots, and themes as well as a full bibliography. It whets the reader's appetite for the full-scale Carr biography in the works from mystery historian Douglas G. Greene.

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"Q"

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POE-TIC CORNER

MEDIA FAVORITE

by JEANETTE WEISS

One night when sleep evaded me,
I pressed my Cable button,
And there upon my TV screen
Appeared a young Jim Hutton.

That he was playing Ellery Queen
Soon became quite plain,
And acting as his dad appeared
A youthful David Wayne.

And what a quaint delight it was
When right before the end,
Ellery turned his face to me,
Chatting like a friend.

Reviewing all the suspects and
Their motives in this thriller,
He challenged me to use my wits
And try to guess the killer.

Just when this film was first produced
I really cannot say—
But wouldn't it be charming
If they did some more today?

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"Q"

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ALL WET

by JOHN J. VOBER

The rain was softly falling
The day he used his knife
To sever all relations
Established with his wife.

A perfect spot beneath the oak
Would hide the evidence—
The cops would never search the ground
Out behind the fence.

He lugged her dripping body
And dug a hurried pit,
And there made his deposit
And quickly covered it.

But when the cops inspected,
They found the shallow grave
By following their instincts
And footprints he had made.

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THE HANGING JUDGE

by JOHN J. VOBER

The day was good for dying,
The hanging judge proclaimed,
And so they greased the gallows
And everybody came.
They tightened up the noose
And swung him until dead—
But someone made a goof
And hanged the judge instead.

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU WEAR

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

To white-collar crime, my reply
Is that I'm not that kind of guy.
Some may think it quite cute
Pulling jobs in a suit,
But I just don't like wearing a tie.

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PUTTING ON THE BRAKES

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

Poor Mazie's long marriage
Was full of dissension—
Each day that slid by
Held unbearable tension.
She finally came
To the end of her rope—
With Fred's drunken states
She would no longer cope.
She had to get rid
Of this nasty, mean bully—
She thought it all over,
Considering fully.

Fred got in his car
One pleasant spring day,
Went speeding, when *wham*—
His brakes just gave way.
His crash and dread end
We shudder to mention—
But Mazie's collecting
A nice widow's pension.

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a *NEW* Ganelon story by

JAMES POWELL

In the 1870s, Ambrose Ganelon, the first of the famous line of detectives, frequented The Blue Tureen, choosing always to sit under the small oil painting of a serving bowl of leek-and-potato soup from which the restaurant took its name. Ganelon and Gabriel Marbeuf, the artist, had shared a garret during their hungry student years.

Last year's EQMM Readers Award winner James Powell knows from student years in Paris, having studied at the University of Paris and having taught in France before settling down here in the U.S. . . .

THE VALLEY OF DEAD MILLIONAIRES

by JAMES POWELL

Amid the ramshackle warehouses and abandoned shipping terminals that crowd the water's edge in the southeast corner of San Sebastiano's Old Port stands an unpretentious little restaurant called The Blue Tureen. The ruined shell of the old Imperial Airlines seaplane hangar hems it in on the north. On the south, it shares a small paved parking lot with the old Customs House now used by the Principality for records storage.

The Blue Tureen specializes in the fish stews and daubes of veal and lamb preferred by the residents of the quarter. Its wine cellar reflects this simple, robust fare—or, more exactly, its wine closet does, since like its neighbors the restaurant extends out over the water of the harbor on piles. Buried beneath layers of linoleum somewhere is the trap door used by smugglers to offload their con-

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traband rum and tobacco in the very shadow of the Customs House. And there was a considerable traffic in shanghaied drunken sailors in the other direction.

In the 1870s, Ambrose Ganelon, the first of the famous line of detectives, frequented The Blue Tureen, choosing always to sit under the small oil painting of a serving bowl of leek-and-potato soup from which the restaurant took its name. Ganelon and Gabriel Marbeuf, the artist, had shared a garret during their hungry student years. The public of Marbeuf's day didn't share his obsession with food as a subject for art, but today that painting hangs in a place of honor in the Marbeuf Museum.

As for Marbeuf, he died of malnutrition, a haggard old man, in San Sebastiano's charity hospital in the arms of his friend, Ambrose Ganelon. All of a sudden, the dying artist's eyes had darted about feverishly, as if searching for something. Then they fixed on a gravy stain on Ganelon's vest and, with a happy sigh, Marbeuf gave up the ghost.

At the turn of the century, Ambrose Ganelon's son and namesake, the tall, elegant detective with the scientific bent, frequented a laboratory-supply company in the Quarter and could regularly be found sitting at one of The Blue Tureen's sidewalk tables reading *Spying for Profit*, a publication to which he himself contributed a column on new paraphernalia of an espionage kind under the pen name "Hollow Heels."

In the 1930s, the third-generation Ambrose Ganelon, he of the fedora, the trenchcoat, and the lopsided grin, nursed many a set of broken knuckles over a glass of Black and White scotch in The Blue Tureen as he matched wits with Lady Emerald Fong, whose high binders fought for control of the harbor and the offshore gambling boats.

By the time the fourth and current Ambrose Ganelon succeeded his father at the agency, major criminals had learned to give San Sebastiano a wide berth. As a result, Ganelon had to stand by and watch the detective agency slide slowly into secret insolvency. He would have liked to close up shop and find another line of work. He thought of becoming a public accountant. It now struck him as prophetic that he'd taken Simon for his Confirmation name after St. Simon Stylites, who, like an accountant, had made his living on a column, too. But Ganelon knew if ever he took down the bronze plaque on the house on the rue Blondin, the criminal element would descend on San Sebastiano like a wolf on the fold.

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Sometimes when the money from the modest trust fund set up by his jewel-thief mother ran out before the quarter did, Ganelon would pay a visit to The Blue Tureen. Renaud, the proprietor, a quick, short-legged little man with a strong torso and a peasant head that seemed to be armored with something more than bone, always refused Ganelon's call for the check with a stubborn shake of the head and unfailingly joined the detective for a final drink on the house. That was how Ganelon came to know some of Renaud's extraordinary story.

At the end of the Second World War, a young Renaud had shipped out as an assistant sea cook on the *S.S. Captain-General Corbeau*, a freighter of the Appolinaris Line with a passenger capacity of twenty-four which made regular passage from the Principality to South America, stopping at Recife, Salvador, and Rio de Janeiro. Among the passengers on one particularly rough crossing was a bright-eyed old man named Sandor, who walked with a limp and carried one arm hanging useless in a black sling. In spite of heavy seas, this Sandor always braved the elements to smoke his after-dinner cigar.

One evening, sent to fetch live chickens from the deck menagerie for the next day's lunch, Renaud emerged from the gangway just as the ship topped an immense wave and began the long sideways slide into the deep trough and saw both Sandor's legs, the good one and the bad, slip out from under him on the sloping hardwood deck. Sandor cracked his head on a lifeboat and, unconscious, slid toward the rail. Renaud took two steep strides down the deck, and by throwing himself forward onto his stomach managed to get an arm around the old man's chest and grab a stanchion just as the two of them slid under the ship's railing. Here a sailor happened out on deck. When he saw them hanging over the side, he froze until Renaud shouted for him to throw down the nearby firehose. Using it as a rope, the sailor and Renaud managed to pull Sandor to safety.

The next morning, this Sandor summoned his two rescuers to his cabin. "Years ago when I was your age," he told them, "I saved a stranger's life during a forgotten revolution in Latin America. He rewarded me with a map to a certain location up the Amazon where, with luck, courage, and determination, a man could find his fortune. Now it's my turn to give you two a copy of that map. But you must swear, as I did, that you'll only tell the location to someone who's saved your life." Then he laughed and said, "But, for God's sake,

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don't be like me. I've lived extravagantly. I've had to take this tired old jug of a body to the well more than once too often." He gestured around at his afflicted arm and leg. "But, ah, what the hell, I went alone. You'll be together. Two shipmates tried and true. And besides, I'll fill you in on what to expect."

"The next thing I knew," Renaud told Ganelon, "the sailor and I were standing on the deck of a forty-foot riverboat out of Manaua back where the black waters of the Rio Negro merged with the muddy Amazon. Three riverboats later, we found ourselves on a corrugated wreck of a leaking teakettle with a sweaty, sharp-eyed old bag of bones as captain and crew.

"Sandor'd warned us to watch out for this guy. His name was Quentin. From Confederate stock that'd settled in Santarem after the Civil War. The other passengers in the shade of the tattered mat awning were a barefoot Franciscan priest, who rattled his rosary impatiently against the gunwale when Quentin turned his boat up the small swift tributary of the white Rio Branco, and the three surly-looking natives.

"This Quentin put us off at a clearing on a rise. Then, warning us to be waiting when he returned at the time appointed because he wouldn't wait, he turned his little vessel around and headed back downriver.

"We found the dugout weighted down with stones along the river bank where Sandor said it would be. Two days' paddling, a four-mile trek through the jungle, and suddenly the trail ended at the foot of a mountain staircase of ancient stones so thick with moss it looked like what-do-you-call-it, topiary work. Sandor'd studied up on things and said an ancient people called the Javari had enslaved the Iquitos, a simple jungle tribe, and used them to build the staircase and the high city it led to, and to mine the emeralds the Javari used as arrowheads.

"One day, with strange rumors flying of the coming of a Golden King, of men with six legs and two heads, of great ships that sailed on the wind, the Javari armed the Iquitos and ordered them to guard the city gate to the death. Then the Javari marched out to battle another tribe driven from their part of the jungle by refugees fleeing inland from the coast of the endless sea. The Javari never returned. But descendants of those Iquitos still guard the ruined city, driving off intruders with emerald-tipped arrows.

"We set up camp there at the base of the mountain. The next morning we started our long ascent up the staircase. The heaps of

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human skulls that crowded each turning were so moss-covered they looked like harmless carnival things. After several hours, the massive stones of the overgrown gate came into view. Soon the staircase made a dog leg that brought it close to the brink of a precipice high above the treetops of the jungle valley.

"Just as Sandor promised, a low wall separated the staircase from the precipice with a kind of ledge about two feet wide behind it. A treacherous crawl on hands and knees along the edge of the precipice would bring you right opposite the city gate. Then all you had to do was lift an arm or a leg over the wall to start a hail of arrows. The Iquitos were good marksmen. Pretty soon you'd have an emerald arrowhead worth tens of thousands buried in your flesh. Then, if you didn't pass out from the pain and fall over the precipice, all you had to do was drag yourself back out of bowshot.

"Sandor's advice was that we draw lots for who'd take the arrow and who'd have the job of getting us back to civilization. The sailor won the arrow. And that was okay by me. Well, he crawled out there, but then he froze. I mean solid. There was no way he could bring himself to offer the Iquitos an arm or leg. Finally I crawled out and tried to drag him back by the ankles. But the guy was holding on for dear life. I must've showed some shoulder over the wall trying to break his grip because here comes this sizzle of green and an arrow shot over my head and dropped down into the valley. Before I could get back down, another one found my shoulder and knocked me off the ledge and into space.

"I fell a hell of a distance before the vegetation growing on the steep mountain wall began to break my fall and then toss me outward until, suddenly, the tops of the trees were there. It's crazy, but it was like I was being caught, cushioned, and handed down from tree to tree, from bough to bough, until there was nothing but a hard thirty- or forty-foot drop, a real bone-shaker, to the jungle floor.

"When I recovered consciousness, I tore the arrow out, dressed the wound with a poultice of cobwebs, and found my way back to the outside."

"But what about the sailor?" demanded Ganelon, unhappy with the way the story ended.

Renaud had looked away. "For all I care, he's still up there hanging onto that ledge," he said—and would say no more.

In the end, all Ganelon knew was that Renaud came out of the jungle alone and with a small emerald worth enough for him to buy The Blue Tureen where his father had worked as a waiter . . .

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The day began hot and dry, as they sometimes do in San Sebastiano at that time of the year. A small wind sprang up around midmorning and then, as if surprised by the dust it raised, died down again, leaving behind a heavy stillness that turned the water of the harbor into thick glass. Ganelon felt a bit lightheaded as he rounded the corner and saw The Blue Tureen. For two days he'd eaten nothing but pain d'epice, a cheap concoction of sliced bread, molasses, spices, and shelf life that gave the lie to "hunger makes the pickle."

But Ganelon needed more than lunch. Secret poverty had turned his days into one petty deceit after another. As a counterbalance, he had come to rely on *coup de theatre* deductions of the kind his grandfather would have considered vulgar. Without one every week or so, he tended to get the jitters. Well, it wouldn't be long now. In a few minutes Renaud would show him to a table in the crowded restaurant. Ganelon would chat a bit, until one of those angel's-passing moments when the conversation around them faltered. Then, refusing the offered menu, he would read the choices of the day from the easy hunting ground of spots, stains, and smells on Renaud's old corduroy jacket. Ganelon smiled as he anticipated the sounds of amazed diners choking on their wine and crockery being dropped as far as the kitchen. But when he reached the restaurant's door, he found a notice:

CLOSED BECAUSE OF MY DAUGHTER'S WEDDING DAY.

Ganelon cocked a sad eyebrow and had started to walk away when Renaud, who must have seen him from the window, appeared in the doorway, dressed in striped trousers, shiny black shoes, a grey vest, and an unbuttoned wing collar, his arms loaded with empty champagne bottles. He urged Ganelon to come inside.

The detective went, disappointed he'd missed his free meal. And what grand deduction can you make from rented clothes?

Bright streamers decorated the restaurant ceiling above the wreckage of the wedding reception Renaud was in the process of clearing from the tables. "We have to have a glass to celebrate the occasion," said Ganelon's host, dragging an open bottle from an ice bucket.

"Who's the lucky boy?" asked the detective.

"Charles Gautier, Gautier's son. You know Gautier," replied Renaud.

Ganelon nodded. "By reputation," he said. A dynamo of entrepreneurial energy, Gautier the father had run through more money in

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thirty years of failed business ventures than most men could squander in ten lifetimes. His next-to-last catastrophe had been the San Sebastiano dealership for a U.S. subcompact automobile called the Tyler 2. Gautier had lost everything he owned except a converted canal barge, a flat-roofed Noah's ark of a thing he'd been renting with himself as captain and his son as crew to tourists with a yen to amble the waterways of Europe.

"Charles has been waiting table here off and on for two years now," said Renaud. "Ever since Gautier came up with a new scheme: long-distance canal-barge racing."

"An inland-waterways Tour de Europe?" wondered Ganelon.

"You've got it. The wheeling and dealing's taken up all his time ever since. He claims television rights alone will make him rich again." Renaud shook his head. "But nothing'll come of it. Hell, he's lucky he's still got the barge for Victorine and Charles to use for their honeymoon trip. Gautier's driven them over there. I expect him back anytime now. He promised to help me clean up. I hope nothing's happened to him. He's using my car."

Ganelon raised his glass. "Here's to the newlyweds and happiness," he said.

When they'd drunk, Renaud said, "I'm ready to retire. Soon they'll be running the place." He smiled a bit sadly. "And may they be as happy as my Rosalie and I were, God bless her!" His smile brightened. "And may you visit them more often than you visited us!"

But when Renaud offered more champagne to seal the toasts, Ganelon refused and made a move to go. "Only one glass on an empty stomach, that's my rule."

Renaud hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Of course! You came for lunch! Here, you sit down here," he said, leading Ganelon to a table over by the windows. "I'll fix you a plate of something in no time." Ignoring Ganelon's halfhearted protests, he hurried off to the kitchen.

Ganelon's father had used that same table many times before, sitting staring out across the water past the crenelated ramparts of Fort Ste. Odile at the harbor mouth, and beyond the dark shape of the ancient island prison called the Chateau Gai to where the lights of the gambling ships twinkled on the horizon. But Ganelon chose to sit in the other chair, which looked out on the empty parking lot. It wasn't that he felt himself less the detective than his father. No one could deduce much from formal wear. Unless the wearer worked in them. The gigolo, the headwaiter, the musician. (Yes, Ganelon's

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father had drilled him well on musicians, the wear on the trouser calves called "cellist's inseam," the peculiar way a trombone player shoots out his arm when smoking, and that unique deformity of the ear called "harpist's cauliflower.")

Noise in the entranceway made Ganelon turn. More formal wear arrived in a rush like a sudden storm. Or at least it seemed to Ganelon the man might have a small tempest hidden about him somewhere—wind and rain inside the jacket, dark clouds under the tophat, and what would seem to be a very large quantity of hail in the left hip pocket.

He recognized the newcomer's ruddy face from television. In the Tyler 2's final gasp, Gautier had appeared in ads himself, looking desperate around the eyes and clasping and unclasping his hands as he pleaded with people to buy his wares.

The man heard Renaud rattling around in the kitchen. Taking off his coat to join in the cleanup, he shouted, "How about this? There's a harmless knockout gas—the salesman says it actually leaves a guy feeling better than before you knocked him out." Then he saw Ganelon and stopped.

The detective rose and introduced himself. Gautier blinked and offered his hand. "Delighted," he said, giving the detective a thoughtful look that wasn't what Ganelon expected. On first meeting, few people could conceal their disappointment that the detective bore no resemblance to Humphrey Bogart, who always played his father on the screen.

At just that moment, Renaud reappeared with a plate heaped with cold chicken, ham, and salad which he set down in front of Ganelon. "I see you two have met," he said, sitting down at the table and gesturing at Gautier to pull up a third chair.

Ganelon caught Gautier giving the plate of food a worried look. Then the man glanced at the clock behind the cash register. He scowled over a sum or other in his head. But the bottom line must have been satisfactory, for he perked up and joined them. "A toast," he said, refilling the detective's glass and Renaud's before pouring wine into his own. "Now that our two families are one, may Renaud and I set our feet on the road to financial independence for our children."

Renaud sighed theatrically. "Oh, don't start on that," he said. "The man never gives up, Mr. Ganelon. That's all he ever talks about. And lately it's gotten worse."

Gautier laughed and pushed his chair back from the table to cross

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his legs. "You tell me," he asked the detective confidently. "Am I wrong not wanting my son to end his days here at The Blue Tureen?"

The question caught Ganelon with his mouth full. He slowed his knife and fork and looked interested. At the same time he noted a moist reddish-brown stain on the sole of Gautier's shoe near the heel.

"I've been damn happy here," insisted Renaud.

"Okay, maybe Charles'd be happy here, too," agreed Gautier. "But maybe he wouldn't. Right now he doesn't have a choice. That's what we'd be giving our children—choices. But I can't do it alone. You're the only one who knows the way."

"Then forget about it," said Renaud. "I'm staying put. Just watch me."

The two men glared at each other.

To relieve the tension, Ganelon said to Renaud, "I gather Mr. Gautier wants you to take him with you on another trip up the Amazon. But I thought you gave Sandor your word you wouldn't."

Gautier laughed out loud. "Oh, we're not talking about the Iquitos' piddling little shooting gallery. Go on, Renaud. Describe the fortune you'd deny our children and our grandchildren. Hell, tell him everything."

Renaud studied the other man's face for a long moment, then he shrugged and turned to Ganelon. "I've got to start back to when I took that arrow in the shoulder up on the ledge," he said. "This is what really happened. When the arrow hit, the shock jerked me erect and there I was, teetering on the edge of the abyss. Suddenly the sailor came to life—"

"Give the poor bastard a name," demanded Gautier.

"His name was Gautier, okay?" Renaud's answer was quick and angry. "And he made a grab like he was reaching out to help me. Then he shouted something."

"I shouted 'Mine!' " said Gautier. "Damn it, it was mine! We'd drawn lots—that arrow had my name on it! So I reached up and gave the shaft a good pull and out came the arrow. You fell. Me, I took two more arrows, lucky superficial ones, before I could get down behind the wall again and crawl the hell out of there."

Gautier refilled his glass and drank it down. "Somehow I got the dugout back to the pickup point," he continued. "I was half crazy with fever by the time Quentin showed up. Sandor'd told us the guy was a coward but warned he'd try to rob us and dump us overboard

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if he thought he could pull it off. So there we were, greed and cowardice in one end of the boat and cowardice and greed in the other."

Gautier gave an unhappy laugh. "But I won," he said. "I bluffed it through. You see, I knew Quentin was a coward. He wasn't sure about me. I walked out of the jungle a rich man—for all the good it's done me. Everything I touch turns bad. People used to say I was that rare commodity, an unlucky rich man. They didn't know how unlucky. If I'd taken the arrow meant for me and fallen, I'd have been the one who found the Valley of Dead Millionaires." Gautier reached for the bottle again.

Here Renaud took up his part of the story. "I told you about the fall, Mr. Ganelon. All that part's true. Well, when I regained consciousness on the jungle floor it was dark. My body ached and my shoulder pounded like a drum. I didn't try to move. I just lay there trying to pierce the darkness around me. After a while I could make out the dim shapes of bushes and trees. And not far away I saw the figure of a man leaning against a large rock. I called out to him, but all he did was stare and smile.

"Just then the full moon began its rise above the valley rim and my man turned back to what he was—a skeleton. When the full light of the moon reached down into the valley, it turned everything silver-grey and scattered points of green light across the valley floor. All I could think of were lightning bugs and I reached out my good arm and tried to catch one. But when I drew my arm back, I found an emerald arrowhead in my cupped hand, the remains of an Iquito arrow that had missed its mark.

"There were other arrowheads that had not. The skeleton against the tree had a twinkle of green inside its ribcage. Looking around, I could see three more skeletons. I knew there'd be more, the remains of adventurers like myself who'd come to find wealth and discovered that death sometimes came with it. Yes, I was in the Valley of Dead Millionaires. Then I guess I passed out. When I came around again, I was in a makeshift bed under a makeshift roof of fronds, my shoulder wound cleaned and dressed. A tall man in rags was trying to make me drink something warm. Blue chicken broth?

" 'Parrot,' said the man, adding like he was giving away some gourmet secret, 'the blue-and-yellow ones.' Then he asked, 'Who are you?' And quickly added, 'Here you can be anyone. Except Dr. Todt.' He tossed his head with the name as though this Dr. Todt was somewhere down the valley. 'Or Napoleon Bonaparte,' he added. 'I'm Napoleon.' He must have taken my surprise for disbelief. 'I'm shorter

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than I look,' he insisted. Then he repeated, 'Who are you?' When I gave my own name, I could see he was disappointed I hadn't chosen to be someone more celebrated.

"Then he said, 'Dr. Todt has the pistol, so he makes the rules around here. And here they are: Never touch the emeralds or try to escape. Got it?' He made his hand into a pistol, pointed it at his temple, and wagged his thumb. 'Our job is to guard the emeralds until the dead whose bones you see around you come back to claim what is rightfully theirs on the Day of Judgment. All that came to Dr. Todt in a dream. Now you're thinking Dr. Todt's crazy, right? By now I probably am, too. And so will you be soon enough. Now get some rest.' He lowered my head back down on the makeshift pillow."

In the midst of Renaud's story, Ganelon saw Gautier's eyes harden suddenly. The man was staring at the mouth of the harbor where the ferry boat returning from the Chateau Gai had just appeared. The island prison's museum dedicated to the legendary Man in the Iron Boot was popular with tourists. This mysterious Sixteenth Century figure some believe to have been the true Prince of San Sebastiano was the central character in Scalamandre's touching if old-fashioned ballet which bears his name. The ferry would pass close to The Blue Tureen as it headed for its dock on the Quai des Matelots.

Suddenly Gautier said, "Let's hurry things along. I haven't got all day."

"But the next part's where Dr. Todt punishes me when he discovers that cache of emeralds I wanted him to find." Renaud turned to Ganelon. "He emptied his pistol of all but one bullet and placed the barrel on my temple. Three times he spun the cylinder and three times he pulled the trigger. Click. Click. Click. Three times my whole life passed."

"Cut to the chase," insisted Gautier.

Renaud shrugged. "Okay. There was this little creek coming down from the top of the valley. Down at the bottom, Dr. Todt had built a stockade of trees and vines across the creek bed which was the only way into the valley or out. When I was up to it, I took my time on guard duty, which meant standing up on the stockade and watching for intruders. No one ever came, but if they did I was supposed to sound the alarm and Dr. Todt would come rushing down with his pistol to drive them off.

"Dr. Todt kept a pretty sharp watch on me my first couple of

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weeks' guarding. So I didn't give him anything to complain about. But when I figured the time was right, I filled my jacket pockets with my real cache of emeralds, relieved Napoleon, and took my turn on the stockade. Now, on the other side, the creek ran through a narrow ravine that staggered down the mountainside several hundred yards before the jungle started up again. That was how far I had to go before I'd be anywhere like out of danger. It wasn't going to be easy.

"Well, I lowered myself down from the stockade real quietly. But I hadn't gone ten yards when I heard Napoleon jump down behind me, waving his arms and shouting, 'Wait up! Wait up!' Dr. Todt sure wasn't going to sleep through a row like that. To make matters worse, the running was tougher than I'd figured. The rocks in the water were so slick I had to run straddling the creek with one foot on one side of the ravine and one on the other.

"I soon heard Dr. Todt up on the stockade shouting for us to stop. Not long afterward, Napoleon caught up to me. 'I run fast for one of your short guys, don't I?' he yelled, breathing heavy. By that time, Dr. Todt was down in the ravine running after us, spinning the cylinder of his pistol and pulling the trigger as he came. Finally, he got off a shot. Napoleon moaned, 'Able was I ere I saw Elba!' and fell forward. His body hit me in the back of the knees and knocked me into the creek.

"I scrambled out again and kept on going. Dr. Todt had to stop to put another bullet in the chamber, but he was soon after me again. By God, that straddled running took it out of me. But madmen mustn't get winded, because Dr. Todt was gaining fast. When he got to about ten feet behind me, I heard him spin the cylinder and knew the barrel of the pistol was pointed at the back of my head. The click sure gave me a shot of adrenalin and I spurted forward. Then he caught up again and I heard the cylinder and another click.

"Five times I heard the click, and suddenly I knew in my heart I wasn't going to survive the sixth. Then and there, running at full tilt down that ravine, I decided it was better to be a live pauper than a dead millionaire with a madman standing guard over my bones. So I pulled my pockets inside out, sending emeralds flying everywhere.

"Well, I'd done the right thing. The madman stopped to fix in his mind where each emerald had gone. Then he snapped off a quick shot at me. I heard the bullet whine by my ear. Looking back over my shoulder as I ran, I saw him put another bullet in the chamber.

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But then, as if he'd decided I was too far ahead, he stuck the pistol in his waistband and started gathering up the emeralds."

"Later, working my way back down the Amazon on a riverboat," Renaud said, "I felt something in the lining of my jacket. It was a small emerald arrowhead that had fallen through a hole in one of the pockets. That's how I bought this place."

"Let's go back, you and me," urged Gautier. "This Todt character's long dead by now."

"Maybe. And maybe he found a few crazy disciples to carry on his work."

"If you're worried about hurting crazy people, I told you there's this harmless knockout gas," insisted Gautier.

Renaud shook his head. Then he turned to Ganelon. "In a way, this is all my fault," he said. "When I came back home, Gautier had just taken his first big shellacking. On the stock market, I guess it was. Me, I'm as vindictive as the next guy. But for the moment he seemed to be doing a pretty good job of punishing himself. So I just sat back and watched. Then, the day after he lost a bundle trying to corner the cork market, I showed up to say no hard feelings and hint around about the Valley of Dead Millionaires.

"That was my stupid revenge, God help me. From then on, he'd drop by after every financial reversal with fresh arguments for mounting an expedition to Dr. Todt's country. In fact, those visits were how my Victorine and his Charles got acquainted. I guess I did lead him on. But nothing'll make me go back to the Valley of Dead Millionaires."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Gautier. "But perhaps Mr. Ganelon should leave us to work this out between us."

"Not before he's had his piece of wedding cake," insisted Renaud.

Convinced that Renaud really did want him to stay, Ganelon remained seated waiting for his cake.

After staring at the detective for a moment, Gautier said, "So be it." Turning to Renaud, he reached into his vest pocket, pulled out two gold wedding bands, and set them on the table.

Renaud picked them up and frowned. "What the hell's going on here?"

Gautier tapped the table with his forefinger. "The newlyweds and I shared a bottle on the barge. Their wine was drugged. I sailed them to a place you'll never find and left a bomb with a timing

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device on board. Unless I get back to it in the next twenty minutes, they'll be killed."

Renaud laughed with disbelief. "Kill Victorine? Kill Charles? You'd never do that."

"Rather than have them live like this? You bet," said Gautier. "I don't want grandchildren who'll curse my name. Sure, they'll say, nice old Grandpa Renaud would've made us rich, but he couldn't trust cowardly and greedy Grandpa Gautier to help bring the emeralds out."

Gautier shook his head as if to drive the words away. Then he said, "Yes, I'll kill them." He drew a small automatic from his left hip pocket. "And maybe I'll kill you. And for sure I'll kill myself. I'm not much for trials and jail." He waved the weapon in the air. "You know I'll do what I say. Coward or not, I'm a man of my word, just like you. Promise to take me to the Valley of Dead Millionaires and I'll shut off the bomb." He turned and looked at the clock. "Otherwise at exactly two-seventeen they'll both be dead."

Renaud looked at the detective. "Mr. Ganelon, can't you help me?"

"Sure, help him," said Gautier. "Tell him how many places there are on the waterfront where a man could hide a barge."

Ganelon set his napkin down and pushed himself back from the table. "Let's not drag this out, Mr. Gautier," he said, regretting at once how pompous he sounded. "Yours was a clever plan. But as they say in third-rate stories, not quite clever enough. You made one mistake."

"Like not remembering a famous detective sometimes ate at The Blue Tureen?" asked Gautier.

"That, too," said Ganelon with a modest smile. "I see now that your initial concern over the clock was whether I'd have eaten and gone on my way in time for you to make your little bomb threat. You decided I would. But suddenly, right in the middle of Renaud's story, you were out of time again. Why was that?"

Renaud broke in desperately. "Please, Mr. Ganelon, the bomb goes off at two-seventeen! Do something!"

"Bombs don't go off at two-seventeen," said Ganelon. "That lie was Gautier's last hope to get you to agree to his terms before his plan fell apart. Don't worry, we've plenty of time." He turned and gestured through the window to where the Chateau Gai ferry was moving toward them, bound for its terminus on the Quai des Matelots. "Sitting here listening to you, Gautier suddenly realized he hadn't taken the ferry schedule into account."

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Renaud scanned the deck of the ferryboat as it came abreast of the restaurant as if he expected to find his daughter and son-in-law among the passengers. When he didn't, he gave Ganelon a defeated look.

But the detective signaled him to wait. In the next moment, the first waves spreading out from the wake of the ferryboat reached the pilings of the restaurant and passed beneath the building. Then there was a loud bump and The Blue Tureen shook and the plates and glasses rattled. The bump came again and again, the unmistakable sound of a canal-barge roof striking the underside of a restaurant floor.

The rescued newlyweds were groggy but appeared to have suffered no serious ill effects from the drugging. Nevertheless, Renaud insisted on calling a cab to take them to the hospital, asking Ganelon to stay with Gautier until he returned. Perhaps he was afraid the man might try to harm himself.

The detective sat and waited, sipping a glass of wine. He suspected that no charges would be brought, which meant Gautier would remain a problem.

For a while Gautier sat by himself at a corner table, working on his own bottle and muttering to himself. At last he said, "It was a good plan, a damn tidy plan. If Renaud didn't go along with me, the bomb would blow us and all we own in the world to hell."

"And me," said Ganelon.

"I asked you to leave," said Gautier.

"And I thank you for that," said Ganelon with a small bow.

Gautier frowned at his wine glass. "Damned if I see how you figured it out just from that clock business."

"Well, there were a few other things," admitted Ganelon. "After you arrived, I noticed the parking lot was still empty. You could've parked somewhere farther away. But if you had, I'm sure the dusty street would've dried up the wet spot on the sole of your shoe. So how did you come if you didn't come by car? And where did that spot come from?

"Your concern about the ferryboat gave me the answer. You came by the honeymoon barge, moored it out of sight under the restaurant, and got the rust spot on your shoe when you scrambled up the metal embankment ladder. One of the rungs was wet, perhaps from the wake of the ferryboat on its trip out to the Chateau Gai."

"Believe me, I'll try again," said Gautier. "I've a lot at stake!"

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Before Ganelon could answer, Renaud came through the door and said, "You won't have to. No, I've been thinking: hell hath no fury like the curse of an unborn grandchild. So when the honeymooners get back, what do you say the two grandpas'll take a try at the Valley of Dead Millionaires? Live or die, let's put a stop to all this and set you right with posterity."

That seemed to tie up the loose ends. Ganelon's grandfather had always warned that a detective should never let people see him putting on his galoshes or lingering around the scene of a solved crime. Ganelon rose and said his goodbyes.

He was halfway out the door when Renaud called after him. "Mr. Ganelon, if we get back alive, you'll get a share of the emeralds!"

"No, thank you," smiled the detective with a firm shake of his head, for he had long ago convinced himself that any moneymaking enterprise he had a share in was doomed to failure. "Just come back safely."

But, walking away, it occurred to Ganelon that having saved both their lives he'd earned one of those maps to the Iquitos' jungle shooting gallery. A nice clean hit in the arm or the leg would keep the detective agency operating another few years.

But of course he couldn't go. Who would mind the store?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

BUT WHAT'S DONE IS DONE

by JACK LEAVITT

Mata Hari
Used to carry
Secrets for the Hun.
But poor Mata
Soon found that a
Spy's life isn't fun.

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Our "Mrs. Arnold" contest, introduced in the March anniversary issue, received 551 responses, from every state in the country except Nebraska and Rhode Island—and from Washington, D.C. and Canada, Iceland, Northern Ireland, Hong Kong, Australia, and West Africa. Deciding on two winners from such a wide response, as you can imagine, wasn't easy. We finally agreed on four—to give you a small idea of the variety of the entries. All four alternate endings to Berton Rouéché's story will appear directly after the original story, which follows . . .

MRS. ARNOLD CONTEST RESULTS

by BERTON ROUÉCHÉ

"It was Maxwell House," Earl said. "The little two-ounce jar."

"You're sure?" I said. "We can't take any chances."

"About the coffee?" he said. "Positively."

"About everything," I said.

"Everything except maybe the jelly. Like I said—I'm pretty sure it was Smucker's, and I *think* it was grape. It looked like grape. But I can't guarantee it. You know where the jelly is, Mr. Weaver. That's pretty far from the peephole."

"All right," I said. "I guess we're okay. And thanks, Earl. You did a good job."

I went back up the aisle to the front of the store. The rest was up to me.

There were lines at all five checkouts. She was in Number Three with two older women ahead of her. She had a full cart and her pocketbook was there on top. It was a big square red-leather bag with a black handle. I walked down and around and stood behind the Number Three packer and waited. I could feel my heart beating

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and I took a breath to slow it down. I hoped to God she wouldn't make a scene.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Arnold," I said.

"What?" she said. "Oh—hello, Mr. Weaver."

"I wonder if I could speak to you a minute?" I said.

"What?"

"I'd like to speak to you a minute."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it might be better if we went into my office," I said.

"Really, Mr. Weaver," she objected. "I'm afraid I don't—I mean, I'm really in a terrible hurry. My oldest girl—"

"You can leave your cart here," I told her. "The boy will keep an eye on your things. Chris?"

"Sure," Chris said.

"Well—" She gave a little shrug. "But I'm really—"

"Please bring your pocketbook with you," I told her.

She turned back and picked up her pocketbook. She seemed to sag. I let her pass and then followed her along into the office and closed the door. She sat down on the chair at the end of the desk with her pocketbook on her lap. I sat down behind the desk and cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry to have to say this, Mrs. Arnold," I said.

She raised her head and looked at me. She looked sick. She looked like death. She looked eighty years old.

"I know," she said.

"Yes," I said. "But I have reason to believe that you have certain items from this store in your pocketbook. Items that you neglected to pay for."

"I know," she said again.

"Items that, in fact, you stole."

"I know."

"Now, then," I said. "Now, let's see. I believe you have in your bag a small jar of Maxwell House instant coffee. And a bar of Dove soap. And a small package of Philadelphia cream cheese. And a tin of Underwood's deviled ham. Am I right?"

She nodded. "I guess so. I don't know. I'm so—"

"Oh, yes, and a jar of jelly."

She sat hunched in her chair.

"May I have them, please?" I said.

"What?"

"Let me have them."

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"Oh." She opened her pocketbook. She took out a bar of soap and put it on the desk. And a jar of Maxwell House instant coffee. And the deviled ham and the cream cheese—and the jelly. The jelly was Smucker's crabapple jelly.

I sat for a moment and looked at her. "I don't understand you, Mrs. Arnold," I said. "I just don't get it."

"I know," she said. She looked down at the floor. "It's—I can't explain it. Something just came over me. It seems like a—I don't know. A dream."

"I wish I could believe you," I said. "I wish it were true—that that's the way it was. That it was just a crazy impulse. That it just happened. But the fact is, Mrs. Arnold, you've been stealing from this store for a long, long time."

She didn't say anything.

I said, "Isn't that right?"

"No." She raised her head. "I mean—yes. Oh, Mr. Weaver, I'm so—"

"All right," I said. "And I'm sorry, too. So now I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm not going to tell the police. This is too small a town for that. Neither of us wants that kind of trouble. It isn't necessary."

"Thank you," she said.

"What I'm going to do is this," I told her. "I'm simply going to bar you from the store. I don't ever want to see you in this store again."

She sat up straight. "No! Oh, my God, Mr. Weaver—no! You can't do that!"

"I'm afraid I have to."

"Mr. Weaver," she said, "I *promise* you. I promise I'll never—I give you my word."

"I don't have any choice," I said.

"Please," she said. "I swear I'll—please, Mr. Weaver. I have to come here. What could I tell my husband? What could I say? I can't afford to trade at Lester's Market. I have to trade here."

"What about the A&P?" I asked.

She didn't say anything.

"I'll answer that question for you. You can't trade at the A&P. You were barred from there last summer. Isn't that right?"

She stared at me.

"I said I didn't understand you," I said. "And I don't."

"I know. I know—but, please, Mr. Weaver. My husband would kill me. He'd *kill* me!" She began to cry.

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"I'm sorry," I said. "I really am. But—"

"All I ask is one more chance," she begged. "Just give me one chance—I'll prove it to you."

"I wish I could believe you," I told her.

"You can," she said. "You *can!*" The tears were running down her cheeks. Her eyes looked enormous. "Oh, Mr. Weaver—"

As she reached across the desk and grabbed my hand, her pocketbook slid off her lap. It hit the floor and opened, spilling a billfold, a cigarette lighter, and a pair of glasses. Something else rolled under the desk. I felt and found it and picked it up. It was an avocado.

Alternate Ending #1 . . .

"Look," I said, "all you have to do is promise not to shop here again. Your husband won't need to know about it and the matter will be closed. I think that's pretty fair, don't you?"

She got up, tears torrenting down her face, and said, "You're sending me to be killed."

I watched as she dragged herself out of the store and got into the passenger side of a new model pickup truck that quickly pulled away.

"Well," Mrs. Arnold said to the driver, "the safe *is* behind the cabinets, a Knueharsingen model, and there *is* a rear door. I'll draw you a complete diagram."

Antoinette Lojkovic
Monterey, California

Alternate Ending #2 . . .

Suddenly the ground started shaking.

"Oh!" Mrs. Arnold exclaimed.

"Let's get out of here!" I grabbed her arm and we ran for the door. Outside the office, we joined everyone else scrambling for the main exit. Shelves were shaking, cans and bottles were falling and exploding. Plaster and roof tiles were raining down everywhere.

We stood outside the building in the parking lot. People were hanging onto cars to stay upright. Mrs. Arnold and I ducked behind a van to shield ourselves from the flying glass. This one had to be an eight on the Richter scale, at least.

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I was still in shock, looking at the ruined store, when I heard Mrs. Arnold saying, "You win, Mr. Weaver! It's a sign from the Lord! I'll never shop in this store again, I promise!"

Kyle E. Chafin
Hamilton, Ohio

Alternate Ending #3 . . .

"Mrs. Arnold, you need help," I said.

"Please, Mr. Weaver, I—"

"No, listen to me," I said. "You've got to promise me you'll see a psychiatrist."

Mrs. Arnold looked at me, bewildered, and said, "But, Mr. Weaver, I *am* a psychiatrist."

Mabel Edwards
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Alternate Ending #4 . . .

As she reached across the desk and grabbed my hand, her pocketbook slid off her lap. It hit the floor and opened, spilling a billfold, a cigarette lighter, and a pair of glasses. Then something else fluttered to the floor. It was a yellowed news clipping which read:

NO SURVIVORS

Morton Arnold, age 39, and daughters Emily, 10, and Vanessa, 8, were killed instantly yesterday in a freak collision with the 5:45 commuter train from Vacaville.

Stapled to the underside of the clipping was a check from the Continental Life Insurance Company made out to Cornelia Arnold for $250,000. The date on the check was five years old.

Lillian Feldman
Chicago, Illinois

HONORABLE MENTION

Elaine Benson of North Port, Florida
Barbara Boyle of Hayward, Wisconsin
A. W. Cook of Wayne, New Jersey

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Winifred S. Nicoll of Latham, New York
Rebecca Orford of Missoula, Montana
Marie Padilla of Daly City, California
Rene Pizzo of Oregon City, Oregon
Fran Rathmann of San Antonio, Texas
David Richards of Sterling Heights, Michigan
Freddie Seymour of Sandwich, Massachusetts
Jan Shear of Los Angeles, California
J. E. Wilson of Charlotte, North Carolina

Editors' Note . . .

Many who sent new endings requested we give readers an idea of some of the other endings suggested. Following is a list of many that were duplicated among the entries received.

Mrs. Arnold is a consumer advocate testing for freshness of produce.
Mrs. Arnold is a consumer advocate checking for price fixing.
Mrs. Arnold is a security agent.
Mrs. Arnold's lawyer sues the store for accusing her of shoplifting while she is still on the premises with the merchandise.
Mr. Weaver blackmails Mrs. Arnold and she, an undercover policewoman, arrests him.
Mrs. Arnold blackmails Mr. Weaver because of an extramarital affair she knows he's having.
Mrs. Arnold bribes Mr. Weaver with money, or tries to.
Mrs. Arnold bribes Mr. Weaver with sex, or tries to.
Mr. Weaver enlists Mrs. Arnold's help for hire, to help him spot other shoplifters.
Mr. Weaver enlists Mrs. Arnold's help as a shoplifter for a ring he heads.
Mr. Weaver is Mrs. Arnold's son.
Mr. Weaver is Mrs. Arnold's son-in-law.
Mr. Weaver is Mrs. Arnold's grandson.
Mr. Weaver is Mrs. Arnold's father.
Mr. Weaver is Mrs. Arnold's brother.
Earl is Mrs. Arnold's son.
Earl is Mr. Arnold.
Mr. Arnold is the sheriff.

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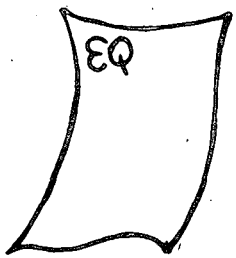
Mr. Arnold is the mayor, and Mr. Weaver promises him he will keep Mrs. Arnold's shoplifting quiet in exchange for favors he wants.
Mr. Arnold is a psychiatrist.
Mrs. Arnold is the daughter of the owner of the store.
Mrs. Arnold is the wife of the owner of the store chain.
Mrs. Arnold is a descendant of Benedict Arnold.
Mr. Weaver allows Mrs. Arnold to continue to shop at the store under close supervision.
Mr. Weaver and Mrs. Arnold strike a deal and when she leaves he discovers she has stolen items from his desk, his person, or the store (e.g., a shopping cart).
Mr. Weaver discovers that the avocado is from Lester's.
The avocado is a hand grenade.
Mrs. Arnold falls and sues the store.
Mrs. Arnold kills Mr. Weaver—in some cases with a stolen knife or gun.
Mrs. Arnold kills Mr. Weaver with rat poison.
Mrs. Arnold kills herself.
Mrs. Arnold kills her husband.
Mr. Arnold kills Mrs. Arnold, leaving Mr. Weaver despondent.
Mr. Weaver wakes up—it has all been a bad dream.



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a ***NEW*** short story by

MILLI JANZ

The little darlings would inhale, sniff, pat, sweat, glue, smack, flack, rub, dilute, and inject anything short of swine urine to get, maintain, or start a dizzying high—which shortly fell to a dull, thumping low, a low so deep and strong that the body was eventually carried away in a bag or used as a statistic for a newly developed program, study, rehab center, or the morgue.

Among Milli Janz's many accomplishments are the successfully produced plays Piaf—A Remembrance, An Evening with Kurt Weill, *and* An Evening with George Sand, *feature articles in books, magazines, and newspapers, including* The New York Times, *and a variety of writing for the media. She was Assistant Professor of English, Speech and Literature at Fairleigh Dickinson University, has lectured on culture, theater, and writing at colleges and universities throughout the country, and received the Governor's Award for Excellence in Production for directing Shakespearean plays at The New Theater of New Jersey. This is her first appearance in EQMM . . .*

TAKE A STICK OF CINNAMON

by MILLI JANZ

There I was, just married, and, independent as I had been, wondering what to do to please my husband. Wondering what to do to make him happy to be home.

I know what I'll do, I thought, I'll make up a batch of cookies. The kind his mother always talked about in her high-pitched whine.

With light and dark raisins, and currants, and dried apple chips washed with sugar, then soaked in honey and pineapple syrup. The

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ingredients were expensive but would be worth every dime because they would make him happy.

After his long day of talking, whispering, selling, pitching, asking, expecting, bribing, waiting, exaggerating, lying, then finally insinuating electronic game machines into the hands of dirty, seedy, greedy, grubby kids who never seemed to get their fill of gimmicks. And he did the same thing to the parents of spoiled students, who bought every machine available to keep their little darlings in school, quiet or sober, so that eventually they would be able to go out on their own, to earn money, to afford their own needs, and run their own lives—far away.

Most customers were middle-class, middle-aged adults, shackled and threatened by their eternal children, and the little darlings were not little, not darling, but always a problem to everyone. They smoked anything they could steal, angle, cajole, pimp, buy, or cheat from anyone who did a share of stealing, angling, cajoling, pimping, and cheating: friends, parents, remote relatives, lovers, friends of friends, friends of parents, and so on and on.

They would inhale, sniff, pat, sweat, glue, smack, flack, rub, dilute, and inject anything short of swine urine to get, maintain, or start a dizzying high—which shortly fell to a dull, thumping low, a low so deep and strong that the body was eventually carried away in a bag or used as a statistic for a newly developed program, study, rehab center, or the morgue. In reality, each is the same and all that differs is the body and the place it is filed.

Then I'll drain the juices from the raisins and the currants and set them aside. I'll beat the eggs with a fork a long time—a very long time—until they're golden, smooth, and fluffy. No white or gummy spots. It'll look like liquid sunlight.

Then when my wrist gets tired, I'll add milk. Just enough to make the froth thin. I'll add two drops of lemon flavor, right from a lemon, and I'll stir the batter with a cinnamon stick.

Where can I get a cinnamon stick around here?

Bill told me one time that his mother ordered her cinnamon sticks way before the holidays, when she planned her cookies.

In this area, even the grocer wouldn't know that cinnamon comes in sticks. He'd offer me a small white can of the powdered stuff and even bring the price down to entice me to buy, but I wouldn't. I'd insist that cinnamon was available in sticks someplace else. The short, stubby grocer would lift his arms helplessly.

Then I would go to his competitor up the block and learn that this

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was the only store for blocks around that sold them. After that, this storekeeper would consider me the classiest lady in the neighborhood. And always make sure to tell his customers about the cinnamon sticks, and the fine quality of people who shopped in his store.

"What a waste of milk."

He would carry away his feeling of satisfaction and she would carry away her own feeling of being a good, dutiful mother.

Bill didn't really have to drink it all, because they were going to have vegetables for dinner. Broccoli. Mashed potatoes and carrots. Cooked carrots. Yeuch! They always looked smashed and slimy. He hated them, and she kept making them.

"You'll change your mind, and when you do you'll grow to be a big, strong boy with the brightest, clearest, best eyes in the whole world."

Well, he didn't change his mind about cooked carrots. He hated them to this very day.

Yes, I would stir the batter with a cinnamon stick, put it aside, and use it later as the decoration. Then I would grind some into a powder and flake all the rest. I wasn't sure what to do with it, but I would find a use for it. Waste not, want not, is the right way to live.

Upon reconsideration, I hated learning about cinnamon sticks from my mother-in-law, but that knowledge put me a level higher than the group I was in contact with. Because I didn't marry up. I plan to work my way up one day.

Yes, one day my husband will join a group or organization, and while the men talk business and the women are off in their corner talking furniture, children, and vacations, I'll bring up the subject of unusual foods and there it will be—cinnamon.

Cinnamon. Not a spice: a trick. Trick. Isn't that what prostitutes call their customers? What is it that prostitutes do with their minds while their bodies are being used as receptacles for passion, energy, and exercise? I'm glad I only have to deal with cinnamon. Or is it all the same thing?

I added flour and baking powder and stirred everything with a slow and steady hand. My wrist wasn't tired any more. The batter absorbed the raisins and currants and soon everything was gold and smooth.

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For occasions like this, I used the exact, right spoon. His mother gave it to me. She even showed me how to use it with that special flick of the wrist. There was a trick to holding the spoon and throwing the batter. If it was thrown right, the cookie came out round and full. If it wasn't, it was a mess.

Amazing. When I did it exactly right, it worked. Soon the tray was dotted with lumps evenly lined up and ready to be baked.

I lit the oven, then put a small piece of newspaper on the middle grill. I was once told that it would turn light-brown when the stove reached 350 degrees. This was an old stove, built before oven thermometers. I couldn't begin to imagine its age. Surely older than I was. Some places would call it vintage, and sell it for a bundle of money. But the porcelain door was cracked and filled with flaking rust along the inside. And the grills were missing rods. It was current junk, bought "as is" for $50.00.

I never told you about myself. I'm not the usual starry-eyed bride. I'm fifty-one, with a mangled career of lovers, jobs, divorces, and enough addresses in my past to make a wanderer homesick.

Until now, I never told you that my husband is a former alcoholic, pusher, pimp, and addict trying to become an honorable member of society.

When he had nowhere else to run, he decided to go straight, looked for and found a wife: me. This is our love nest, our home, complete with rats, roaches, cracked windows, and bad plumbing.

This was our new start. We were married a week.

He was selling calculators in a discount store and I was the All American housewife, which is already out of style. And a good thing, too—the work's too hard, the hours are too long, and there's no pay. No one wants her. No one needs her. No one likes her. Except that I wanted to try it for a while.

After a dinner of meat, potatoes, and tea, as suggested by the counselors, homemade cookies would be a nice dessert.

I washed my face, but the wrinkles remained. They were there to stay. It was early. He wouldn't be home for three hours. I would take a drink while I was waiting. I had plenty of time.

Decoration could wait. Cinnamon flakes only had to be sprinkled.

Just one drink. A small one.

Amazing how long it takes for the oven to heat.

The paper was tan. In went the cookies. Just a little sip.

Seconds later, fire engines and sirens screamed all around. And

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there stood Bill. He was yelling at me about my lousy cookies and how they smelled up the whole neighborhood.

"Cookies? I baked them for you. I wanted you to love me."

He started to laugh—and so loud that it frightened me.

"Love you? What for? Burnt cookies?"

"Your mother taught me to make them for you. She told me they were your favorites!"

"You must be kidding. My mother couldn't cook to save her life."

"Then why did you always use her as an example to me? Why did you always compare us?"

"I thought it would shape you up."

"Shape me up?"

My mouth fell open with rage and the pointlessness of my life. Bill shouldn't have laughed.

With nothing else to do, nowhere else to go, and no more life to live, I picked up the nearest weapon and plunged it into his chest. It was a long-bladed meat knife, recently sharpened to scrape rust off the oven and paint out of corners, and to trim the linoleum so that we could use roach powder.

I pulled at the handle. He struggled and called me a bitch. So I plunged it in again deeper. Harder. Again. Again. His mouth opened and formed the word "Why?"

Blood flowed from his chest. It stained his white shirt with the frayed cuffs. The shirt was dirty. He had worn it three days and planned to put a fresh one on the next day. He owned three white shirts and alternated them every three days. This was the second one. This was the day he was to change it.

The blood was warm and thick and red. I didn't know what to do. His mouth was still open. He seemed to be grinning, and the blood seemed to be getting thicker and darker and stiffening on his shirt.

The smoke was gone. The only thing left in the air was a horrible haze and the rancid smell of burning food. So I took the cinnamon and began to sprinkle it around the kitchen, on the closets that needed painting, and under the linoleum.

Maybe the kitchen was old and maybe the stove was older. But the cinnamon was good. It made everything smell delicious.

With that, people would ignore the ugliness of the blood and every other thing could be freshened up with a new coat of paint. And it would look like new.

And I remember that someone took my arm and he smelled so nice, and he was so gentle.

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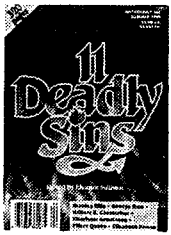

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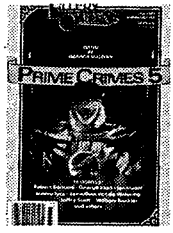

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ON OUR COVER

The formidable-looking suspects on the cover of this issue are formidable in a different sense in real life. Left to right, they are:

Joan Kahn. Winner of the second Ellery Queen Award from the Mystery Writers of America in 1985, Joan Kahn's imprint on a mystery novel has for years guaranteed quality, reliability, enlightenment, and entertainment for the reader, a solid future in the genre for the writer. Between her first position as a reader, then editor, at Harper & Row and her retirement last year from St. Martin's Press, her list of authors has included Hammond Innes, Andrew Garve, Patricia Highsmith, Julian Symons, Nicolas Freeling, Joseph Hansen, John Ball, Michael Gilbert, Tony Hillerman, Dick Francis, Jane Langton, Peter Dickinson, Robert van Gulik, Reginald Hill, James McClure, John Creasey and J. J. Marric, Dana Lyon, Jonathan Gash, and Patrick McGinley. She has also edited some of the most rewarding mystery anthologies ever assembled—classics in the field—and written, to date, four children's books, the first of which, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Ringmaster,* she illustrated herself.

John Lutz. A prolific contributor to *EQMM, AHMM,* and other magazines for over twenty years, John Lutz has also been publishing novels since 1971. His most recent, published by St. Martin's, is *Time Exposure,* featuring his well conceived, well received private eye Alo Nudger, he of the chronic nervous stomach and anxiety about his choice of career.

Shirley Baker. A woman of many talents, Shirley Baker has managed a word-processing service, hostessed a bed-and-breakfast in Greenwich Village, New York, and co-written a yet-to-be-published mystery for young adults. She and her husband, college professor and artist Chester Boterf, are the parents of a grown son and daughter. In 1971 she was on the cover of John Lutz's first novel, published by Pocket Books, *The Truth of the Matter.*

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

"I have nothing!" *Iris declared hotly, and before the lawyer could open his mouth to protest: "Oh, I know what you're going to say. I have money, this beautiful house, friends—well, maybe a few, anyway. But I have no* one. *I've been alone for seven years—old and alone—ever since Hugo died. Even before he died. You know what he was like. Why must you regard this as no more than a senile caprice. . . . ?"*

A SUITABLE GODSON

by DONALD OLSON

When summer came to the Bay, seemingly overnight, like the swift invasion of an army in green, Iris Manning knew she could wait no longer. The winter dreams that had nourished her longing for Barry Alan acquired a vividness as overpowering as that brilliant assault of summer, turned desire into obsession, and fired her spirit with a recklessness that brought a look of alarm to the face of Baldwin Russell, her lawyer.

"What you're suggesting is highly unethical, Iris. I wouldn't dream of trying to bribe the information out of them. And the agency has no legal obligation to tell you anything. I've explained that."

"But he's my grandchild!" she cried with a stubborn thrust of her chin.

"Godchild, my dear, not grandchild."

"Godchild, grandchild, what's the difference? He's my only *bond,* the nearest thing I have to family."

"Please. Take my advice. Put the idea right out of your mind. Be content with what you have."

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"I have *nothing!*" she declared hotly, and before he could open his mouth to protest: "Oh, I know what you're going to say. I have money, this beautiful house, friends—well, maybe a few, anyway. But I have no *one*. I've been alone for seven years—old and alone—ever since Hugo died. Even before he died. You know what he was like. Why must you regard this as no more than a senile caprice?"

The lawyer shook his head. "Iris, I do understand. I find it very touching that you've taken it into your head to play fairy godmother to a young person you haven't seen in twenty-three years. A generous but misguided impulse. What more can I say?"

They were in the summerhouse at Windridge, the columned white mansion behind them, the bay spread out below. Iris remained seated as Russell glanced at his watch and rose to depart. She restrained him with a peremptory, "Wait! You can say you'll do what I asked. Hire me a private investigator. Someone discreet but resourceful, if you know what I mean."

"If you mean unscrupulous," he replied sternly, "it would make no difference. The adoption agency will tell him no more than they told me."

"That remains to be seen."

He looked down at her—a small, wiry figure who looked older than her sixty-eight years but still with a withered-rose prettiness and those remarkable eyes that gave her face a look of unyielding toughness of character.

The visit had disturbed Russell, and as he drove away he found himself wondering if his client's expression, "senile caprice," might be closer to the truth than he liked to imagine. But then, hadn't she always been capricious? He thought about the girl, Trudy, and tried to remember what she'd looked like. Irish, he recalled, and pretty—brought into the house as maid and seamstress. Iris and Hugo had been married ten years, a stable enough marriage, but childless. Perhaps that was why Iris had taken the girl under her wing, treated her with motherly affection, been overly indulgent. When Trudy had gotten pregnant—by a sailor, she'd claimed, who had quickly left port—Iris had been sympathetic, paid the bills, bought the baby's clothes, insisted that she and Hugo act as godparents at the infant's christening.

A lively girl with an alluring brogue and stars in her eyes, Trudy had gone off to New York when Barry Alan was a year old, leaving Iris with the feeling that her own baby had been wrenched from her

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arms. When Trudy stopped answering her letters, Iris made inquiries and found that the girl had died of leukemia a year after putting her little boy up for adoption.

And now, much to the lawyer's dismay, here was Iris badgering him to trace her lost godson, refusing to believe he could do nothing. Well, she was an old and valued client and there was a great deal of money at stake. He could scarcely refuse her request.

The agent's name was Porter Fielding. He was young, brashly confident, and ambitious, with easy charm, looks, and not overly encumbered with scruples, as Iris shrewdly managed to discover.

"Money is no object," she told him, "but that doesn't mean you have carte blanche to embark on a limitless number of wild-goose chases. Getting the information out of the adoption agency may be costly, I'm prepared for that. Then you may have to go to Florida."

Fielding raised an eyebrow. "Nothing in the data Mr. Russell gave me mentioned Florida."

Iris looked faintly abashed. "I didn't tell him. He thinks I'm batty as it is. I consulted a psychic. A remarkable woman. She wrote me when my husband was killed. I gave her little Barry Alan's picture. She told me he's alive and she saw palm trees. Palm trees mean Florida."

"Or California, or maybe Hawaii." Hiding his scorn for such a lead, the young man's eyes acquired a wistful gleam as he pictured himself living it up in a plush hotel suite on Waikiki Beach.

"Find him, that's all I ask. Find out all you can about him and then report to me."

Iris felt confident that money would procure the information about Barry Alan's adoption, and that with it in hand Fielding should have little trouble in tracing the boy. If not, then she would have to invent some other plan. Wise or not, she could wait no longer.

A mix of charm and money succeeded in opening the adoption agency's files. Fielding learned that Trudy's little boy had been adopted by a New York couple named Rappolle, further inquiries producing the information that adopting a child had not solved the Rappolles' marital problems. They'd been divorced and both remarried, Grace Rappolle to an airline pilot in Sarasota, from where they'd later moved to Tucson.

In Tucson, Grace told Fielding that Barry Alan and her new husband had never hit it off and that suddenly, at eighteen, the boy had

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left home. In the ensuing seven years she had heard from him only once, when he'd written her for a copy of his birth certificate, giving a post-office-box address in Sarasota.

Fielding flew back to Sarasota, where the address proved a dead end. Grace Rappolle had told him that Barry Alan had worked in filling stations and carwashes in Tucson, so Fielding made a round of such establishments. He was about to give up when the manager of a carwash in Bradenton remembered Barry Alan and that he'd given him a letter of reference to a motel beach resort on Anna Maria Island called the Bella Capri.

Late the following day, Fielding, having checked into the Bella Capri, strolled across the terrace to the white sand beach where a well built young man in gaudy swim trunks was lowering the awnings on a string of cabanas. Fielding took out a cigarette.

"Hi, got a light?"

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"Smart you."

Up close, Fielding noted a rustic look about the young man, especially in the rough, unfinished look of his sunburnt features, the short thick nose, the freckles, the truculent cast of his wide lips, the untidy thickness of curly red-gold hair. Only the vivid blue eyes betrayed a subtle awareness more acute than the other features might suggest.

"Man, you've got what I'd call a dream job," said Fielding, adopting his most ingratiating manner.

The boy shrugged. "Pay's lousy, but it beats pumpin' gas."

"Live here at the beach, do you?"

"No, I got me a room in town."

Fielding glanced away at the squalling aerobatics of the seagulls. Under the sky's fast-fading afterglow, the Gulf loomed as motionless as the flood-lit swimming pool. He watched as the young man finished his job and plodded heavily through the sand to the terrace steps. The search had ended, but Fielding was in no rush to report to his client. His accommodations were plush, his view of the Gulf entrancing, and he could reasonably argue that he hadn't completed his assignment. "Find out all you can about him," Iris Manning had instructed. Fielding knew what that meant: she wanted to make sure he was a "suitable" godson before committing herself to anything. The ingrained wariness of the rich.

And so he allowed the days to pass, exerting himself only to ven-

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ture a few discreet inquiries of the staff, learning that Barry Alan was considered a loner, keeping himself to himself and doing his job. Cynically wondering if the boy was too good to be true, Fielding amused himself by following the young man's Honda Goldwing from the Bella Capri to a rooming house two miles inland where he apparently lived alone, and on other nights on what appeared to be aimless joyrides along the Gulf beaches under the stars.

It may have been boredom as much as curiosity that inspired Fielding one afternoon to practice his talents by forcing entry into the young man's room in the somewhat shabby rooming house across the causeway. In truth, he expected to discover nothing more incriminating than a stash of pot. What he did in fact find hidden there left the investigator both thoughtful and excited, and no longer bored.

At noon the following day, Fielding sat nursing a beer and nibbling shrimp on the patio of a ramshackle bar-restaurant called the Sunset Cafe, where fishermen and pelicans with the same air of silent, watchful patience lined the adjoining seawall, when the young man arrived on his Goldwing, pulled off his helmet, and approached the table wearing a sullen-baleful expression of distrust.

"Thanks for coming," Fielding greeted him.

"Your note said it would be to my advantage."

Fielding ordered him a beer, then, before speaking, drew from his pocket a solid gold I.D. bracelet, dangling it in front of the young man's eyes, then playfully snatching it away as Barry Alan would have grabbed for it. "The inscription reads *Hugo from Iris, 12/25/78.*"

A pool of silence settled over the table, broken only by the cry of a gull and Dolly Parton's voice from the jukebox inside the bar warbling the saga of a misplaced heart. A muscle quivered in the young man's jaw. "You broke into my room," he said, his voice quiet but taut with menace.

"I've often found the feathers in his nest tell me more than the bird himself. I found this tucked away in a bottom drawer."

"What the hell right—"

"Where did you get it?"

"None of your damn business."

"A guy named Hugo Manning was murdered seven years ago in a place up north called Van Buren Point. One of the items stolen by the killer was a gold I.D. bracelet inscribed *Hugo from Iris*. The

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intruder was never found—until now. This—and your fingerprints—should solve the case."

"You're a cop," Barry Alan said tonelessly.

"Let's say I have the same instincts. I'm private. But I know one or two of the guys on the force at the Point. I phoned there after I lucked onto this bauble. Don't worry, I didn't tell them *why* I wanted to know what was stolen during that break-in." He looked at the bracelet, idly admiring it. "Relax, buddy. This has nothing to do with my reason for tracking you down."

"Then why have you?"

"We'll get to that. Tell me, why did you kill him?"

"I didn't! It was an accident. That's the truth. I swear it."

Fielding laughed, looked up as a sail-glider crossed the path of their vision, skimming like an exotic crimson bird into empty blue space. "Oh, sure. And there goes Superman."

"That's why I ran—made it look like a robbery and took off. I knew nobody'd believe me."

"So why did you go up there seven years ago? It must have been right after you left Tucson."

Restless again, the bright-blue eyes avoided the other man's taunting scrutiny. "My mother died when I was five. The Rappolles adopted me. We never got along. When I turned eighteen I got a letter from a New York lawyer enclosing one from my real mother. She was the only one who knew who'd adopted me."

If the boy's story was to be believed, his mother's letter had informed him that Hugo Manning was his father, that he'd been paying her money ever since Barry Alan's birth in return for her promise that his wife never learn the truth.

"I was fed up in Tucson. That letter seemed like the hand of fate. I lit out and hitchhiked up North. I wanted to meet my father, that's all—just meet him. I went to his house up there on the Point. It was late at night. Like a dummy, I expected him to welcome me with open arms, don't ask me why.

"He was half crocked. He took me into his study, said he didn't want to wake his wife. He denied everything, even when I showed him the letter. Accused me of coming there to blackmail him. 'Like mother, like son,' he said. He started to tear up the letter. I grabbed for it. We struggled. He slipped and fell—hit his head on the edge of the desk. I waited for him to get up. He didn't move. When I realized he was dead, I panicked. Grabbed some stuff and ran. I never stopped till I was in Sarasota. I should have ditched the damn

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bracelet like I did the other stuff, don't ask me why I didn't. Hell, man, I just wanted to meet the guy—I didn't go up there to make trouble."

What Fielding found so extraordinary about the confession was the effortless way in which he'd extracted it, almost as if the young man had resigned himself to something like this happening sooner or later and had had his story all cooked up. Too cynical to believe the boy might be telling the truth, Fielding dismissed his accident story as no more plausible than his professed motive in confronting Manning. It was too pat and had spilled too glibly from the young man's lips. Not that it mattered—the truth of what had happened seven years ago was of no interest to Fielding. His only concern was for how he might profit by it.

"They'd never buy your story," he declared. "We both know that. If I turned you in, you'd be facing a manslaughter rap at the very least. You'd do time. And that's what'll happen, buddy, if you don't make a deal with me. You asked why I've been looking for you. I'll tell you. I was hired to find you. So play your cards right and you'll end up a very rich man. We both will. And all it'll cost you is the price of my silence."

Three days after Barry Alan had moved into the house at Van Buren Point, Iris invited Baldwin Russell and his wife and Porter Fielding to a small dinner party to celebrate her godson's return. Lifting her glass to Fielding, she said, "I would call it a miracle were that not to downplay your cleverness and persistence. You've made me very happy, young man."

Fielding accepted the tribute with a modest smile. "Luck had as much to do with it as cleverness, Mrs. Manning." He glanced at Barry Alan, who didn't return Fielding's covert smile of amused complicity. "I feel I know your godson better than anyone. I'm sure he'll be a credit to you."

As the guests were leaving, Baldwin Russell drew Iris aside. "I'm sorry I tried to discourage you, my dear. I was wrong. He seems a fine young man."

"Worth waiting for, wouldn't you agree? I've already come to think of him as my own flesh and blood. Shall I expect you on Monday with the new will?"

She turned to Fielding, who was pondering with smug anticipation the market value of this expensive stretch of bayfront property. If Iris Manning were to die, it would all be her godson's. Barry Alan

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had told him about the new will. And in such an isolated spot, anything could happen to the old girl. Yes, there was much to think about in the days ahead.

"I know Baldwin loathes the water," she was saying, "but I do hope you'll accept my invitation to come sailing with us next weekend. Barry Alan loves the water as much as my husband did. The boat hasn't been out of the boathouse since he died. You will come, won't you? We don't want to lose track of you."

"Nor I of you," Fielding replied as warmly, with another guardedly humorous glance at Barry Alan.

"Then we'll expect you. We'll have a picnic on the island."

After the others had departed, Iris and her godson strolled arm in arm across the lawn to the summerhouse.

"Poor Baldwin," she murmured, "I hated deceiving him. Not that it was all a charade. I really did have no other way of finding you. I couldn't be sure you were even still in Florida."

"I thought you'd forgotten all about me—or were dead," he replied. "What would you have done if Fielding hadn't discovered who'd adopted me?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe pretended to get another message from my make-believe psychic. I certainly couldn't let on I already knew about the Rappolles. But he's a clever wretch, our Mr. Fielding. I knew that when I first interviewed him. I felt certain that if anyone could find you, he would."

Barry Alan uttered a mirthless laugh. "He was a bit too clever, finding that bracelet. Stupid of me to hang onto it. Thank God he's a crook at heart or I wouldn't be standing here now."

She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "I wouldn't have let anything happen to you. I would have told the truth about that night."

She shivered, chilled by the memory: awakening at the sound of raised voices late at night, creeping down the stairs and listening at the study door, listening and learning and remembering. Hugo and Trudy, nuances of behavior of which she'd been oblivious those many years ago. Hugo's slurred, angry words behind the study door refocusing her vision of the past but leaving her heart untouched. Whatever affection she'd felt for Hugo had died of neglect long before that night.

The stifled cry, the thud of a body, and then bursting into the room to find the young man standing there, white with shock and dismay, while seeing in her mind's eye that curly-haired little boy

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she'd once held so lovingly in her arms. Somehow she'd taken charge, her single thought to protect that boy. They must make it appear to have been a break-in. She gave him money and urged him to go as far away as possible and remain there until she felt it safe for them to make contact. Until then they must pretend this meeting had never taken place.

All she'd known was that he meant to go to Florida, but whether he did or not she had never been sure. Hugo had powerful friends and she'd come to believe they would never abandon the search for his killer. Year after year passed and she began to fear the day might never arrive when she'd feel safe in even mentioning the boy's name.

"Odious creature," she murmured, thinking of Fielding. "Those smarmy smiles of his almost made me ill. I wish I could have told him I knew all about his nasty little game. What did he say to you when you took him down to see the boat?"

"He asked me about the will and what sort of allowance you were giving me. And he expected me to worm a couple of thousand out of you before the end of the month. He calls that not being greedy."

"There would be no end to his demands," she retorted. "He'd bleed you dry. And after I'm gone—"

Presently, as Barry Alan became lost in thought, his gaze fixed on the motion of the incoming tide far below, lapping against the foundation of the boathouse, Iris said gently: "What are you thinking about?"

A faraway smile touched his lips. "I was just reading the waves. This old fisherman in Florida told me he could read the waves like some folks read tea leaves, or stars."

"And what do they tell you, my dear?"

"That I've come home. That I'll never leave this place again."

She gave his arm another squeeze. "You won't ever have to leave. This will all be yours someday. And nobody on earth shall take any part of it away from you. I won't allow it."

"I wish there were another way," he replied sadly.

"I'm afraid there isn't. We mustn't think about it. We must simply do it." And then, her eyes peering across the water to the tiny island out in the bay: "You're certain it's true what he told you—that he couldn't swim?"

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Parish finished his drink. He shook another of the little bottles as if he was mixing a cocktail. When he opened it, the cap fell on the floor. Down on the carpet, finding it, he decided to put his shoes in the locker. Might as well stick to the routine. The railway roomette had a small metal door at floor level with the word SHOES *printed on it. Behind the door was a compartment just big enough to hold a pair of shoes. A corresponding door could be opened from the corridor. During the night, Reese would come by and collect footwear. He would polish them back in his compartment, then return them to their respective lockers. It was a bit of upstairs-downstairs service that left Parish feeling sad. But the porter expected passengers to do it, so he did it . . .*

THE LOCKED ROOMETTE

by *WILLIAM BANKIER*

Bernie Loyola set his overnight bag down carefully on the roomette seat. He never let a railway porter carry his bag. They could break fragile things no matter how carefully you packed.

Loyola was an artist at R&B Advertising in Montreal. His copywriter colleague, Dean Parish, was doing some classic coughing in the roomette next door. Parish always sounded as if he was about to die. Their presence on the slow train to Toronto was his fault. Parish refused to fly in airplanes. Loyola and Penni Dandridge, the account executive, had to travel with him. Left to his own devices, Parish might go from the train to a saloon and miss the client meeting.

Loyola moved into the narrow corridor. Parish was talking to the porter, a smiling man with the name REESE on his plastic tag. "A

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small bucket of ice should see me through," he said. He took four miniature bottles of bourbon from his pocket and placed them on the window ledge.

As Reese squeezed past, Loyola said, "And then you can tuck yourself in back there and go to sleep."

"You're not supposed to know I do that."

"After all the times we've been aboard this train?"

Penni Dandridge came from her roomette some way down the corridor. "Would it be possible for you lot to stop arguing?" Her English accent was pleasing to the ear.

Parish said, "Sorry I can't invite you in for a drink. I brought only what I need for myself."

Reese brought the ice. Parish said goodnight to his colleagues, slid shut the door of his roomette, and got on with it.

Loyola followed Penni along the corridor. His short, stocky body was in contrast to her tall slenderness. "How do you see it?" he asked her.

"Magic Mix is my favorite account. We'll have a good meeting."

"I mean Parish. I think he's on a downer."

"Do you?" It was common knowledge around the agency that Dean Parish was a manic-depressive. He was seeing a student shrink at the Institute up the hill at Royal Victoria. Most of the time he was outgoing, if a little overpowering. This could be useful in the ad business. Clients liked to see a copywriter who was full of beans. But when depression set in, Parish could go down a long way. Penni said, "He seemed fine in the office today." Actually, Parish had been tense but she didn't like agreeing with Loyola.

"I think he's masking his true feelings." Loyola rubbed a hand over his bald spot, his dark eyes frowning under beetle brows. "If he finishes all that booze and doesn't sleep, no telling what we'll have to deal with in the morning."

Penni was accustomed to friction between the artist and the copywriter. As account executive, she only cared that they turned out good ads and commercials. "Let me worry about that," she said.

To get rid of Bernie, she went into her roomette and pulled down the folding bed from the wall. It filled the entire space. She had to stand in the doorway while the bed came down. Then she climbed onto the bed and slid the door shut. Only then did she remember she hadn't used the toilet, which was now out of reach under the bed. Bernie Loyola could confound her every time. Mumbling epithets in her feigned Roedean accent, she opened the door, climbed

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down into the doorway, raised the bed into the wall, closed the door again, and proceeded with the business of getting ready for a long night on a clattering Canadian train.

The train was under way, pulling out of Montreal's Central Station. Loyola peered out of his window at dark railway yards, then at fleeting lights on Upper Lachine Road as they picked up speed. He slipped into the corridor and knocked on Dean Parish's door.

"It's open."

Loyola slid the heavy metal door out of the way, looking in and down at his partner. Parish was sitting on the upholstered seat, glass in hand, the three full soldiers jiggling on the window ledge beside their dead comrade. The copywriter's spectacles gave his round face an owlish appearance. Sandy hair fell across a broad forehead. His sock feet were propped on the cover of the john. His shoes were toppled on the carpeted floor.

"Somebody's all comfortable," Loyola said.

"This is as good as it gets."

"Just wanted to say I've forgiven you."

"For what?"

"Giving that lyric to Handelsman. The one that won the CBC contest."

As a sideline, the two admen wrote songs. Loyola cranked out the music, Parish the words. Their success was minimal, but they enjoyed doing it. "Are you still nursing that beef?" Parish said.

"I just told you I forgive you."

"That's nice. I forgive you, too. Goodbye, Bernie."

"You'll be sitting up all night?"

"It's better," Parish confirmed, "than the sardine can with the bed down."

Loyola closed the roomette door and went away. Parish finished his drink. He shook another of the little bottles as if he was mixing a cocktail. When he opened it, the cap fell on the floor. Down on the carpet, finding it, he decided to put his shoes in the locker. Might as well stick to the routine. The railway roomette had a small metal door at floor level with the word SHOES printed on it. Behind the door was a compartment just big enough to hold a pair of shoes. A corresponding door could be opened from the corridor. During the night, Reese would come by and collect footwear. He would polish them back in his compartment, then return them to their respective

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lockers. It was a bit of upstairs-downstairs service that left Parish feeling sad. But Reese expected passengers to do it, so he did it.

Parish got back on the seat, closed his eyes, braced himself against the movement of the train, and began to think about Lisa. Of all the women in all the marriages he had ever encountered, she was the one who should have been his. Was there ever a time when he didn't have fun with her? And she was married to Bernie Loyola. Just one more phase of Parish's life that hadn't worked out.

In the next roomette, Loyola opened his bag and took out his audio-cassette player. It wasn't much bigger than a hardcover book. He popped in a cassette of his own compositions and, with the volume turned low, began to listen. Some of the songs were damned good. Dean Parish could write a lyric, no question about that.

Loyola felt an urge to be holding his guitar, strumming chords in unexpected progressions. He never felt more relaxed than when he had both hands on the instrument. He got more out of it than he ever did from a woman. He began to feel edgy. Angry. The only reason the guitar wasn't here was because he thought it would look artsy-smartsy for him to bring it on an overnight business trip. It was the story of his life, putting off doing what would satisfy him in order to keep up appearances.

After midnight, Reese made his way down the corridor, taking pairs of shoes from the little compartments, marking the roomette number in pencil on the soles. Back in his place, he went through the boring routine of applying polish and buffing with a big brush. Reese gave each shoe a lick and a promise, then took them back where they belonged. He couldn't be bothered just now to wash off the polish staining his hands. He was too sleepy.

He closed the compartment door and sat back to catch as much shuteye as possible. The movement of the car didn't disturb him, it lulled him. His mind raced all over the world and space, exploring scenes he could never describe, had he remembered them. And the dark procession left Quebec and journeyed through Ontario farmland, past Cornwall, Kingston, Baytown, while onrushing dawn overtook the train's slow journey from the east.

In the morning, Penni Dandridge sat with her roomette door open, watching urban clutter through the window as the train made its approach to Toronto. An experienced traveler, she had dressed her-

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self expertly, balancing on one foot and then the other, hitting the walls only once in a while. It was an advantage not to be a user of makeup.

Here she was in the Colonies. At least once a month, the English girl ran herself through this self-congratulatory exercise. If her colleagues back at the London agency could see her now! If they could see the stub from her paycheck! All the move had required was confidence and determination. And an aunt in Montreal who needed looking after.

That was the trigger. When Penni learned that her mother's aging sister had lost her husband, she was off like a shot. R&B was the first and only ad agency she applied to for an account-executive job. Her lie was small and white—that she had done the same work in London. Actually, she had been secretary to the head of the media department. But she knew, after six years, everything that went on in the advertising business. Equipped with this experience, she needed only brains, intuition, and a sense of self-worth. Penelope Dandridge did not lack for any of these.

"Good morning, good morning, we like to see you smile—"

It was Bernie Loyola, singing in her doorway. He often launched into this breezy vocal in his bland tenor voice. It contained references to the percolator perking with people awakening and listening. He once told her it was the theme from some ancient Breakfast Club radio program. Others in the agency apparently knew about it and they would urge him on.

Penni shut him off. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby. Cried all night. You?"

"Like a top. Never stopped turning. Where's Parish?"

"In a drunken stupor would be my prediction."

The train was juddering around a broad curve. Tall buildings could be seen in the distance. Union Station would soon surround them. "We need our copywriter," Penni said.

"Knock him up, as you say in London."

She went down the corridor and rapped on his door. There was no response from within the roomette. "Dean? Are you still asleep?"

Steam hissed. The pullman car jolted and jerked and slammed, throwing Penni this way and that. Eventually, it came to a stop. She held on and waited. One final jolt. Now the beast was dead. Well, at least they hadn't gone off a runway and burst into flames.

She rapped again, then thumped the door with her fist. "Dean? Wake up!"

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Reese was at her side. "He don't answer?"

"No." She tried the door handle. It wouldn't move. "It's locked from the inside."

"I'll get the conductor. He's got a key."

Loyola joined Penni outside the locked roomette. "This is why we don't let him travel alone."

"I've got a nasty feeling," Penni said.

Reese came back with the conductor, who fitted a master key, turned the lock, and slid back the door. Through the aperture, Dean Parish could be seen sprawled on the floor. There was no question that it was Dean Parish no more, only his body. A dead man looks like a dead man.

"Don't anybody go in there," the conductor said. He closed and locked the door. "I'm calling the police. You'd better not leave the train."

"This is a hell of a note," Loyola grumbled. "We've got a ten o'clock meeting. And nobody's had breakfast."

Penni gave the artist a look and went back to her roomette.

The Detective-Sergeant's name was Peter Cleary. Wearing a cheap blue suit and a white shirt that was poorly laundered, he looked like a small-town feed-store manager as far as Penni was concerned. He asked everybody to stay in their compartments. "I'll come and see you," he said.

Penni stood in her doorway and watched him. The detective hunkered down in the doorway of Parish's roomette, arms resting on the tops of his thighs, fingers interlaced. With his ruddy face and cornsilk hair, he now looked like somebody judging which toss would count in a horseshoe pit. After a while, he went inside the scene of the crime.

Penni sat down and waited. She closed her eyes.

"Miss Dandridge?" Cleary was looking at a list of names scribbled on a slip of paper.

"That's me."

"You can go now. I've already spoken to—" he looked at the list again "—Mr. Loyola. What we have here is a suicide."

"No."

"I'm afraid yes. The gentleman injected himself with something lethal. We'll find out what the poison is from the autopsy. The syringe and the dose bottle are on the floor. And the suicide note."

"What did he say? Can you tell me?" The detective was watching

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her with some sort of passive interest. He would let her say as much as she wanted and he would just keep on listening and thinking about it. "We've worked together for a few years. I liked Dean. We knew he suffered from depression but he was taking care of it. Yesterday he seemed all right. —Is there something the matter?"

"Nothing. I just like listening to the way you talk."

Not for a long time had Penni felt the sting of hot blood in her cheeks. And here she was blushing for this hick cop who had somehow got himself hired by the Toronto Metropolitan Police. People could get away with anything.

"May I know what he said? In his note?"

The detective opened a file folder. A scrap of paper lay inside. The handwriting was Dean's—she knew it well. The message said, "It's gone on far too long. It's time for me to end it."

"That's all?"

"Some suicides write a book," Cleary said. "Others just say goodbye."

Penni and Bernie checked in at the hotel. They put their things in connecting rooms, freshened up, and went to their meeting.

The unexpected demise of the copywriter on the Magic Mix account didn't queer the conference. If anything, it gave things a lift. And the client wasn't about to reject a campaign written by a dead man. It was an easy sell.

Lunch was somber at first. Then it lightened up. It was the way old Dean would have wanted it. The artist and the account executive were feeling no pain when they kissed the client team goodbye and headed for the hotel in a cab. At a traffic light, Bernie said, "Now's my chance to buy something for Lisa." He opened the door and climbed out. "See you later."

It was not unexpected. Loyola was famous for bringing home lavish presents for his wife whenever he traveled on business. She was obviously the luckiest lady in all of Montreal.

Penni paid the driver and rode the elevator to her tenth-floor room. She set down the portfolio of layouts and stretched out on the bed. Her head was buzzing from the effects of the luncheon alcohol, but that wasn't the only reason for her feeling of unease. Dean Parish's death—why had he killed himself? Yesterday in the office he had let her in on his plans for the future. He was thinking of taking a sabbatical from the agency. He had some money saved. His idea was to go to England, settle in London, a city he loved, and

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write radio scripts for the BBC. Penni could sense confusion in him, but at least he had a dream. Twelve hours later, in a locked roomette on the Montreal-Toronto train, he apparently injected himself with a lethal substance.

The key factor was the door locked from the inside. Clearly, Parish had been alone when he died. Unless the railway conductor did it, which was even more absurd than suspecting the butler. Or dear old Reese.

The suicide note was in Dean's handwriting. He was dead on the floor, alone. The lines of the note sounded campy. But in his manic phase Parish had a weird sense of humor. Could he have offed himself on a high? Could the drinks have been such a downer that he killed himself on the spur of the moment? But, no, the syringe and the poison proved he had come prepared to kill himself.

Or did Dean carry the wherewithal for suicide at all times? What a dismal thought. A man working from day to day, planning the future, yet having constantly to hand the tools with which to snuff himself in an instant.

Penni heaved herself off the bed. She went through the connecting door into Bernie Loyola's room. However hard she tried to rationalize the suicide, it didn't feel right. Never mind the locked door. If Dean hadn't killed himself, somebody murdered him. Not in a random way, but with premeditation. So forget crazy strangers. It had to be a person who knew him. That left only herself and Bernie Loyola. And she had not done it.

All Bernie had wanted to do when he learned of Dean's demise was go to breakfast. No hint of sympathy. The men were close, had worked together for years. They socialized, too. Dean was often at the Loyola residence being wined and dined by Bernie and Lisa. Penni recalled Dean telling her of a time when he was so down in the dumps he couldn't come to work and Lisa had brought him soup, fed him with a big spoon, then sat with him watching daytime television.

But friends could be so close the relationship might create friction. Heat. Cause for divorce. Motive for murder. The phrases ran through Penni's mind as she browsed Loyola's room. Here was his cassette player. There was a tape in it. She pressed the play button.

The song was one of their own compositions—music by Bernie Loyola, lyrics by Dean Parish, sung by the composer with guitar accompaniment. It wasn't great, but not bad. The song ended. She

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let the tape play on. The next one was a kind of blues. Loyola was singing:

"I'm tired of this broken song,
I've tried but I just can't mend it.
It's gone on far too long.
It's time for me to end it."

The words registered. Penni rewound the tape and listened again. There they were, the exact lines from the so-called suicide note. Come on—this wasn't Dean saying goodbye to the world, it was one of the clever little twists he wove into his pop song lyrics.

Penni got moving. She put Loyola's cassette player into her shoulder bag and headed for the elevators. She wasn't sure what she had, but she was certain she had something.

Detective-Sergeant Cleary was tipped back in a swivel chair, with his shoes propped on the desk near the machine with its slowly revolving tape reels. He was listening to the song for the second time. When the key lines were sung again, he sat up and pressed the Stop key.

"People who kill themselves do weird things," he said. "I've seen some crazy suicide notes."

"Loyola and Parish created this song together," Penni said. "Dean probably wrote out the lyrics by hand and gave them to Bernie. Bernie tore out the two lines and used them as the note."

"The roomette door was locked from the inside," the detective reminded her.

Penni got to her feet. She was annoyed. "Aren't you even going to bring him in and question him?"

"It's a pretty weak suspicion."

"Not in my mind."

"You're not the cop."

"Are you?"

Peter Cleary watched the elegant woman all the way down the hall. She did think she was onto something. Maybe she was. But it was never that easy for the person in authority to take action. He remembered his late father, who had been a policeman in Baytown. Don Cleary became obsessed with a wiseguy who conned his way out of jail after a traffic violation. The man turned out to be a Most Wanted. The elder Cleary traced him to Montreal, became involved in his murder, and ended up eventually killing himself with his own gun. You could be too intense about this crime-solving business. To

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Pete Cleary, it was a job and you gave it your best shot. But not your life.

Of course, this Dandridge girl had a personal stake. It looked as if she had cared a great deal about the deceased. She would never get over it, as the detective knew only too well. He got back to what he had been doing before she barged in with her tape machine and her angry eyes.

Back at the hotel, Penni rode the elevator to the tenth floor. She knew for certain that the hick cop, Cleary, would leave Dean's case on the back burner. Suicide was easy. Murder in a locked roomette was a pain in the neck. He obviously didn't want to know.

In her room, she took the cassette machine out of her shoulder bag. Something greasy came off the plastic case and stained her thumb. It was black. She sniffed it. A familiar whiff. She was reminded of her father years ago in south London, sitting on a kitchen chair with his boots on a sheet of newspaper, spreading on polish with a little round brush.

Shoe polish!

A cold shock ran down her spine. She knew what had happened. More or less. She had a pretty good idea what Bernie Loyola had done.

The telephone operator gave her the police number. She dialed and was put through to Sergeant Cleary. "You must hate the sound of my voice," she said.

"Not really." He wanted to say he could listen to her all night.

"Loyola did it, and I know how. It was murder made to look like suicide. Dean locked in there was the whole idea for the note, everything."

"Take your time," Cleary said.

There was somebody in the connecting doorway. Bernie Loyola came through from his room carrying a shopping bag from Simpson's. He looked at Penni on the telephone, glanced at his cassette machine on the table beside her.

"I'll have to call you back. Or why don't you come over?"

"Is he there?" Cleary said.

"Yes. We can play the rest of the songs and you can talk about getting involved."

Cleary said, "Ten minutes, tops." Dial tone.

"Wonderful," Penni went on. "You and Bernie are going to like each other. Bye!" She put down the telephone. "That's a music pro-

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ducer I know. I hope you don't mind. I borrowed your machine and went to see him this afternoon. He likes what he heard. He wants to come over and meet you."

"What's his name?" Loyola had not moved.

"Uh, Gareth Wheatly." It was the name of a band leader she knew in England.

The artist walked farther into the room and dropped the plastic bag on a chair.

"Penelope," he said, "this is completely phony. If you could hear your voice. Who were you talking to?"

"I told you."

Loyola went to the window and looked down at the traffic ten floors below. He opened the window. The muted roar of rush hour could be heard. He turned. "I'm feeling threatened, Penni. Have you ever felt threatened?"

"All the time. I'm an account executive."

"You were talking to the police."

"All right, I was."

"You don't believe Dean committed suicide. You think he was killed."

"I know he was."

"In a roomette with the door locked from the inside. Mind telling me how?"

"I'm still putting it together." She got up and started pacing, the way she sometimes did in meetings. Loyola sat on the window ledge, listening, staring at the carpet.

"There's a smear of shoe polish on your cassette machine. That was the giveaway. And Dean's suicide note is two lines of the lyric in one of your songs."

"Go on."

"Reese must have polished Dean's shoes and put them back in that little compartment. Then he went to sleep. You came out of your roomette, opened Dean's shoe door from the corridor side, took out his freshly polished shoes, and put your cassette machine inside. It would just fit. You switched it on and let it play. Dean wasn't in bed, he was sitting up drinking. He heard the music, one of his songs, coming from the shoe compartment. Other passengers wouldn't hear it because of the noise of the wheels."

Loyola waited.

"Dean got down on the floor and opened the shoe door. You were ready and waiting on the other side with the door open. As soon as

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he reached for the machine, you grabbed his hand. You had the hypodermic syringe ready. You stuck the needle in the back of his hand or finger or wherever and squeezed."

"His wrist."

"Dean pulled his hand away and fell back on the roomette floor. The poison was very fast. What was it, cyanide?"

"Yes. I got cyanide powder from a friend who works in a hospital pharmacy. I told him I wanted to get rid of some rats. I made a solution of it. The syringe I bought separately."

"Dean must have been dead or unconscious in seconds. You then flipped the note and the syringe through the shoe compartment into the roomette. You reached in and pulled the inner door shut. Then you put back the shoes and closed the outer door. Finally, you picked up your tape machine—"

"Getting some shoe polish on it."

"And went back to your roomette."

"I thought the note was well handled," Loyola said. "Weeks ago, when I made up my mind to do this, I suggested a lyric to Dean. The idea of a song that symbolized a broken relationship. He wrote most of it, but I contributed those two lines. Watched him while he scribbled them on a scrap of paper. Which I got hold of after he added the lines to the finished lyric."

"Not so clever, Bernie. They were what made me suspicious." Penni moved the plastic bag aside and sat down. She could see three packages inside, presents for the lucky Lisa. "Why did you do it?" She had to keep him talking while Cleary made it through traffic.

Loyola's voice was matter-of-fact. "He was going to take Lisa away with him to London."

"Did he say that?"

"She did. More than once. She made no bones about liking him more than she did me. I can tell you this because you aren't coming out of this alive."

"Come on, Bernie."

"I'm not going to jail." He peered up from studying the carpet. There was a very human look, for once, in his eyes. There was anguish. "We used to have a sweet relationship, the three of us. Dean was always over. We'd eat and drink and play cards. And talk. It was ritual. By the time I saw what was happening, it was too late."

"Lisa loves you."

"Used to. Twelve years ago, when we married, she was a naive

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kid. She's matured a lot. We're both getting older, but she's grown up. She realized she could do better than me. She could go with Dean and have a whole new life in England. There was no way of talking her out of going with him. I tried it. And I didn't want to kill her. Keeping her is what this was all about."

For almost a minute, neither of them spoke. Then, getting to her feet, Penni said, "I have to go to the loo."

"No." The stocky little man crossed the room with more speed than she would have thought possible and took hold of both her arms.

"Let go, Bernie." She used the imperious tone of voice that withered wimps in taxis. It didn't work. There was real pain as his fingers dug in and he dragged her toward the open window.

"This is crazy!" she gasped. She was struggling as hard as she could. She was a strong woman, but Loyola was possessed. "They'll know it's you! I've told the police!"

He only dragged harder. Now Penni began to fight. Her clothes were being torn as he switched grips. She pounded his face. His nose began to bleed. She clawed at his eyes, but he turned his head. She could smell the fresh air and feel the cool draft from the open window. She kicked his shin. He growled in pain.

Now she was at the ledge. It was below her knees. She went to the floor so he would have to lift her. She got hold of his chest in a bear hug. If she went out, he was going with her.

The hotel-room door burst open. Peter Cleary rushed in, followed by a bellboy and a man in a suit. Loyola saw them and stopped fighting. "Oh, God," he said wearily, and he stepped over the sill and through the open window.

Penni saw Lisa Loyola on a Montreal street weeks after the death of the two admen had been forgotten by almost everybody. The women never had much to say to each other. Today seemed to be an exception, however, as the widow asked the account executive to have a drink. They went into the Rainbow Bar and Grill and sat at the bar.

When the gin and tonics were paid for, Lisa said as she put away her change, "I'd like some advice. I'm getting ready to move to London."

"Lucky girl."

"Bernie's pension means I can afford it. Plus I'm selling the house. And I've had another windfall as well. I'd like to know a good location

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to buy and I don't want to rely on agents sending me to look wherever it suits them."

Determining how much Lisa could spend, Penni was able to talk for some time about the charm of Chelsea if you wanted to be close in, or the realities of Richmond, which included a busy Heathrow flight-path.

"You're making me homesick," she concluded as Lisa tucked a page of notes inside her purse.

"You'll be more than welcome to come and visit me," Lisa said, bidding for first prize in the annual competition for Invitations Least Likely To Be Accepted.

Penni bought a round, not because she had to but because it was now raining outside. Beside them, a customer finished his drink, then paid the bartender for a couple of miniature bottles of whisky he carried away in his pocket.

Looking after him, Lisa said, "That's what the police don't know."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I was with Dean at his apartment that evening before the taxi came to take him to the train. I saw him putting the stuff in his little bottles of bourbon."

"What stuff?"

"Some tranc he was taking for depression. He opened capsules and poured the powder into the booze. He said it was probably enough to put him to sleep forever."

"You knew he was trying to top himself? And you never said anything?"

"Why should I? He might have been bluffing. The autopsy did reveal the tranquilizer as well as the cyanide, but they knew he was taking it for depression. Anyway, Bernie killed him, so what's the difference?"

Lisa craned her neck to take a look outside. "Oh, good, the rain is letting up." She knocked back her drink and slipped off the stool. "It's better the way things worked out. I was tired of being Bernie's wife. And Dean really couldn't live with his depression. He kept talking about England, but I knew he'd never actually go. Now I can live there in comfort." The widow slung her expensive leather bag over one shoulder. "He surely didn't have to, but Dean remembered me in his will."

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam: Johnson story by

LILLIAN de la TORRE

"I began 'histo-detecting' for fun," Lillian de la Torre has said, "when in 1942 I was inspired to write mystery fiction featuring as a 'detector' Dr. Johnson, the real-life Eighteenth Century lexicographer and sage, narrated by his biographer, the fascinating rake, James Boswell." This extraordinary series began in EQMM's Department of First Stories. Now, forty-seven years later, Lillian has devised yet another charming histo-detection for Dr. Johnson, related to us by his devoted friend from Scotland . . .

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S HOSTAGE

A Story of the Detector's Cat (as told by James Boswell)

by LILLIAN de la TORRE

A golden harvest moon was rising that evening when I donned my bloom-coloured breeches and my gold-laced three-cornered hat and set forth to pay my devoirs to my philosophical friend Dr. Sam: Johnson, detector of crime and chicane, at his lodgings in Waterfield Square. There I found Frank, his dark domestick, lounging by the doorpost.

"Is Dr. Johnson within?" said I. Frank was looking sour. "He is, sir. You will find him in the kitchen," (wryly adding) "opening oysters." Curious to see the great philosopher at such a labour of Hercules, thither I hastened. There I found him, sure enough, hunkered down on his massive hams, opening oysters with a rusty knife.

As fast as he released a bivalve, he offered it to a large tiger-

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striped grey tomcat, whose little pink mouth quickly made away with it. There sat the tomcat, erect as a grenadier, accepting his meed of oysters with stately condescension.

"That's a fine cat, sir," I remarked. "Oh," said Dr. Johnson carelessly, "I have had much finer cats than this one." Then, as if perceiving that the creature was put about by so cavalier a dismissal, he added hastily, "But Hodge is a fine cat, Hodge is a very fine cat."

He regarded his pet with that smile of benevolence that always softened the harsh lines of his rugged face, with its scars of the king's evil, and let the warm good will of the sage shine through, drawing to him man and cat alike.

Rising from among his oyster shells, with his own grave stately courtesy, he made me welcome.

"You come in good time, Bozzy. Do but stay and take a dish of tea with me and I will make you acquainted with the prettiest young lady in London."

"With all my heart, sir. How comes it that you have acquired so valuable an acquaintance?"

"Easily. You must know, sir, that my humble lodgings lie jig-by-jowl with the town house of his Majesty's judge. My Lord Stanfield."

"Stanfield, eh?" said I. "It is all the talk among the benchers that within the week Stanfield will have Natty Jack in the dock and must sentence him to the gallows."

"A notorious highwayman!" said Dr. Johnson. "Stanfield will not spare him." "Speaking of Stanfield," said I, "here he comes now."

I had glimpsed the judge's party approaching. To a frequenter of the criminal courts, the judge's hawk's profile was unmistakeable, and his women-folk proved their quality by their fashionable attire. Hastily polishing up at the scullery tap, we soon were making them welcome in the above-stairs withdrawing room.

Dr. Johnson had not exaggerated. Miss Bess was the daintiest little porcelain figurine it had been my good fortune to encounter in many a year. Long black lashes shadowed a pair of melting violet eyes. And little white teeth smiled from the shapely red mouth like snow-flakes in the heart of a rose. She bore in the crook of her arm a little creature as dainty as herself, a snow-white cat, with sea-blue eyes, which she set down at her feet, saying, "I present my friend, Powder Puff."

"Bess!" said Lady Stanfield sharply, glaring at Hodge. "Take up Powder Puff, we are among rakes!"

Across the room, Hodge had stiffened to attention, his green eyes

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intent upon Powder Puff. Powder Puff simpered and returned his gaze.

As I eyed Miss Bess, I felt a fellow feeling for the grey tomcat. With a cat's uncanny instinct for recognizing an unfriend to cats, Hodge now asserted himself.

He suddenly ascended my Lady's French silk stocking, planted himself on her purple-velvet lap, and fell to "kneading biscuits" with his sharp little claws on her fashionable knee. My Lady screamed and cast him from her, and the tea party broke up in confusion.

I watched them depart, my Lord handing Lady Jean, Miss Bess carrying Powder Puff.

The last I saw of the little cortege, passing homewards along the square, was the long grey tail, erect as a lance of Hodge, escorting his new lady friend home.

Peace descended on Waterfield Square.

But not for long.

"Great heavens!" I cried suddenly. "What is that? A banshee?" "What, Bozzy," smiled Dr. Johnson, "have you never an amorous tomcat at Auchinleck?" "Yes, sir," I replied with a conscious grin, "but I don't yowl like that."

"Sir, it is no laughing matter," replied my moral mentor. "No, sir," I replied meekly. The yowling was broken off suddenly by a yip of pain. A moment later a frantic clawing shook the kitchen door, and Dr. Johnson hastened to open up. In shot Hodge, hackles bristling, tail distended, and flattened himself among the oyster shells under the kitchen table. A figure of wrath followed close upon him—the judge, brandishing his silver-shod staff in fury.

"Pray be seated, my Lord," said Dr. Johnson easily. "You honour my domestick offices with an informal visit. You will find the fireside settle not too uncomfortable." "Humph, that disturber of the peace is yours?" the judge countered, jerking his staff at Hodge, who flattened his ears and shewed his teeth.

"Yes, sir, what then?"

"Then I desire you'll keep him at home and away from my daughter's lap-cat Powder Puff. He is making night hideous with his caterwaulering."

"I grant you that Hodge is no Italian soprano," said Dr. Johnson, "but consider, my Lord, the same passions inflame the hearts of beast and man. Hodge here is protesting his attachment to his fair

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inamorata in his own way, as it were in Shakespeare's own immortal words, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' "

"Twaddle!" snapped the judge. "Sir," said Johnson sternly, "the words of immortal Shakespeare are not twaddle." "Hodge's protestations are becoming a publick nuisance," snapped Judge Stanfield, "and I demand that they be put an end to." "They shall be so, my Lord," said my friend.

The episode ended with mutual courtesies and Hodge, deprived of his oyster, moping under the kitchen table.

Calling in Waterfield Square the next morning, I was shocked to receive bad news. Miss Bess had been stolen away out of her bed by ill-intentioned persons! They had taken her up in her blanket, together with Powder Puff, who slept in her arms. The town was abuzz with the news, and it soon transpired that the kidnappers were Natty Jack's robber crew.

I saw aghast the paper they had pinned to the judge's door:

BLOODY STANFIELD

If Natty Jack hangs, so will Miss Bess. Wee got her hid safe whare you ull never find her til shee is a swinging.

"BANDY-LEGGED BART"

"Natty Jack's second-in-command, another dangerous scoundrel," commented Dr. Johnson. "The Bow Street men have searched in vain every evil den in their vicinity. Miss Bess must be found and fast. Come, Boswell, we must hasten to the judge to offer our services."

We were admitted by the liveried butler with his long face even longer than ever.

In the withdrawing room, we found the judge and his Lady in anguished consultation. "If you condemn Natty Jack," milady was sobbing out, "then you condemn your own daughter!" "God help me," groaned my Lord, "I can do no otherwise." "Alack, what are we to do?" cried Lady Jean.

"Be patient, milady, the law will protect her," I said in a vain attempt to console. "How can they protect her," said milady angrily, "when they can not even find her?"

"I'll send to Auchinleck for the cleverest couple of hounds on the estate and we will soon have her back," I cried. "Good of you, Boswell," said the judge without hope.

"She shall be found, milady, I pledge you my word on it," said Dr. Johnson. "Come, Boswell, there is no time to lose." He made a leg

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and we betook ourselves homeward. There we found Hodge still moping under the table.

Instructed by fast courier, my factor sent the dogs up by waggon—Flasher and Dasher, my smartest couple. The cart rattled up to Dr. Johnson's door as the sun was setting.

"Huzzah!" I cried. "The hounds are here."

"Hounds!" snorted Dr. Johnson. "What use are hounds?"

"You shall see, sir," I replied. "I'll fetch them from the cart." I opened the door. In a flash, Hodge was out and away.

"So," smiled Dr. Johnson, "the feline gets the start of the canine."

"Not by much," I smiled back, seizing my pair's sturdy leathern lead and steering a course for the mansion next door.

My heart was wrung as the judge put into my hand the tiny red-satin slipper. So small to be in such peril! Flasher and Dasher took in the new scent.

They barked all around the square, and then fell to yapping on the judge's doorstep. An irate householder across the square thrust his head out at window, bawling: "Be off or I'll call the watch!"

Flasher and Dasher pulled me hither and thither about the square wherever the little red shoes had trod. They caught a scent that interested them. With a jerk that set me on my breech, they were off Hell-for-leather. Loose cobble and brickbats told their tale on my posterior as my involuntary steeds dragged me wildly down to the foot of Water Lane Hill. They had treed a cat.

Unfortunately for us, the cat was Hodge. Before the skirmish was over, he had wounded Dasher's nose, ripped out Flasher's ear, and landed with all four feet, claws unsheathed, on my best gold-laced hat.

Over the hysterical yelping of the dogs, from somewhere above our heads rang out Hodge's song of victory. The love-notes of a courting cat ascended to the harvest moon.

A bulky shape crossed my vision. Twas Dr. Sam: Johnson, and he took up a stand under the back wall of a disreputable-looking tumbled-down house of resort. I picked myself up and hastened to his side.

"Mr. Boswell, can you climb?"

I considered the house wall above me. "Yes, sir, I can. You observe the window embrasures are like a flight of stairs. I can climb them."

"Are you armed?" "I wear a sword." "Then climb. There is a rush-

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light burning in the topmost chamber. The sash-window is open a crack. Slip through, draw your sword, and stand guard over the sleeper."

I began to climb, feeling like a knight of old saving a princess in a tower. The ground looked alarmingly far below me. I hastily adverted my gaze, to where I caught sight of a dusky shape legging it across the square in the moonlight.

Above my head, Hodge's victory song soared. There he sat on the window ledge, peering intently through the pane. Fending off Hodge, I eased open the window and slipped through. There she lay asleep, on her rude pallet. She wore a shift of sheer French gauze embroidered with strawberries, not redder than the tight little crimson rosebuds that tipped her white bosom. So precious was my charge! I drew my sword and took up my post beside the chamber door.

From the attick descended a bandy-legged man. He carried a dagger. With a lunge, I shewed him the bare steel of my rapier edge, and put him to flight. At the stair foot, a door burst open and I heard the feet of the Bow Street men. Then pandemonium erupted—curses and the sound of blows. I started down the stair, sword in hand, just as the constables had the villains laid by the heels.

A burly Bow Street man—no, it was Dr. Sam: Johnson—emerged from the chamber carrying the girl and Powder Puff in his arms.

At the foot of the stair, Dr. Johnson eased himself and his burden into the curve of the entry-way sofa, supporting the slight form against his sturdy shoulder. Miss Bess opened wide violet eyes upon her rescuer.

"Oh, Dr. Johnson," she breathed, "they kept moving us, Powder Puff and me—for I never let loose my hold on Powder Puff—they kept moving us from hiding place to hiding place." "Where?" Dr. Johnson asked. "I know not, sir," she replied. "They kept me under. I think they gave me a sleepy draft. In all of London, how did you ever find us?"

"Why, my dear," said the great detector, "it was Hodge who found you. Once a tomcat has his lady's perfume stuck fast in his nostrils, you may depend upon it, love will found out the way." "How true," said I.

"Thus it fell out, my dear," went on Dr. Johnson, "that Hodge found out Powder Puff, and by his song told me where she was. Thus it fell out that Mr. Boswell mounted the wall to where you were and guarded you at sword's point."

"Dear Mr. Boswell," breathed Miss Bess tenderly.

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"And," concluded Dr. Johnson, "when my messenger had informed the Bow Street men, they did the rest."

"Hodge is a good cat," said Miss Bess, reaching down and caressing the velvet ears.

"Hodge is a very good cat," said Dr. Johnson. "He shall hereinafter be known as the 'Detector Cat.' We'll have a neat sign set up in the square curiously lettered: 'Johnson and Hodge, Detectors.' "

"And what about me?" I asked.

"So, Mr. Boswell, you would join the firm—in what capacity?"

"Write it thus: 'J. Boswell, Rapparee.' "

"Pray, Dr. Johnson, you are our lexicographer. What is a rapparee?" asked Miss Bess.

"A bully-huff, who wields a rapier."

"And how valiantly," exclaimed Miss Bess, clasping her hands, and regarding me much as Powder Puff was regarding Hodge.

I took out my tablets and, at Natty Jack's fireside escritoire, I sketched in the new sign.

I thought it looked well—so well that I resolved to affix it to the kitchen door as soon as sunrise gave light for the operation.

I created the new sign on a shingle with fireplace charcoal. Hodge, inquisitive like every cat, supervised my proceeding. When I nailed the shingle above the kitchen door, the unwanted din brought Dr. Johnson down in his shirtsleeves to see what was toward.

We were drinking our breakfast tea at the kitchen table, and Hodge was lapping his milk under it, when a thunderous rapping at the kitchen door broke the morning calm.

I hastened to open the door. Instantly Hodge scooted under the table.

It was our neighbour the judge, in slippers and purple brocaded morning gown. He carried a large covered basket. Seating himself on the kitchen doorstep, he uncovered his basket and fell to opening oysters. Allured by the rich fishy aroma, Hodge warily edged towards it, and a morsel of oyster in the judge's hand quickly won him over.

As man and cat sat amicably on the kitchen doorstep sharing oysters, the party-gate creaked and an apparition appeared, wearing a pink dimity pinafore over her dainty white ruffles. She seated herself beside Hodge and began to ply him with morsels of oyster as fast as her father pried them loose.

"A pretty sight," said Dr. Johnson, appearing beside me. He bent his warmest smile of loving kindness upon the group: the judge in

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his purple, his beautiful daughter rosy as the dawn, and handsome Hodge between them in amity.

And over all my sign:

JOHNSON & HODGE
DETECTORS

J. BOSWELL
RAPPAREE

Author's Note: It was inevitable that Dr. Sam: Johnson's favorite cat, Hodge, should play a part in his master's detections. This is his story.

Many people have made this story possible, and I thank them with a full heart.

To my nephew, Dr. José de la Torre-Bueno, I owe the concept of cat psychology that makes Hodge a "Detector Cat."

To my brother Theodore de la Torre-Bueno and his wife Evelyn and their fine cats Tuxedo and Leon, I owe the cat lore that rounds out Hodge's story.

I am indebted to my dear friend Jackie Bellmyer for all kinds of moral support, for her critical judgment, for her intimate knowledge of cats, and for putting together and typing a very patched-up manuscript.

To my valued long-time friend Vincent O'Brien, I owe my thanks for his knowledgeable criticism and much help and encouragement, and for reading Dr. Johnson onto tape with the most pungent sense of his character.

There are many other friends who gave me help and encouragement. To each and all I say, "Thank you, good friends."

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a ***NEW*** short novel by

CLARK HOWARD

Written especially for EQMM's first double issue is this engaging short novel of suspense by three-time EQMM Readers Award winner Clark Howard—whose latest novel, from Dutton, Hard City, *received the following review from Linda Rome in* Library Journal:

"Howard's 19th book is a tour de force. Based on his own life, it tells the story of Richie, a street kid with a junkie mother and a bootlegger father in Chicago in the years following Prohibition. Unsentimental, hard-driving, and beautifully crafted, this novel chronicles Richie's coming of age; his life as a runaway, sleeping in a bowling alley and stealing money from gumball machines to pay for food; brutal foster homes; learning to fight; and, always, his search for his father, who disappeared one day without a trace. Richie's struggle to find his way, to overcome the hardness and horrific circumstances of street life, is engrossing and emotionally satisfying. Howard captures the inner life of Richie and his friends with compassion, humor, and unblinking honesty. This excellent novel is highly recommended."

As is, need we add, Deeds of Valor . . .

DEEDS OF VALOR

by CLARK HOWARD

The Chief of Police smiled at the reporters and television cameras in his office.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "as you know, this press conference is for the purpose of introducing the Chicago Police Department's annual selections to receive the Medal of Honor for

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individual deeds of valor in the line of duty. You've all been given press packets containing the specific details you'll need for your stories. It is now my pleasure to introduce the awardees themselves."

From an adjoining office, two men and a woman were ushered in, and the Chief rose from his desk to meet them. "Some of you already know Captain Samson Niles," he said, clasping the hand of a stocky, fifty-five-year-old black man. "Sam commands our Washington Boulevard precinct, and this won't be the first time he's been in the news."

Passing Niles, the Chief put his arm around the shoulders of a shapely woman of forty, dressed in a jail custodian's uniform. "This is Sergeant Lola Mallard of our Jail Detail. She is a fifteen-year veteran officer and an excellent example of a woman dedicated to law enforcement."

Moving on to the third honoree, the Chief again extended his hand. "Detective Joseph Ryan of the Narcotics Division. Twelve years on the force, two prior commendations." Ryan, an ordinary-looking man of thirty-two, was the only one wearing civilian clothes. "The Medal of Honor is the department's highest award. It is given only for the most courageous conduct in the line of duty, and only when an officer is performing in a life-threatening situation. As you will see from the press packets, all three of these fine officers are well deserving of the award. The ceremony itself will be in two weeks and will be held on our Police Academy athletic field. For Captain Sam Niles, it will be somewhat of a double ceremony, because he'll be retiring that day after thirty-three years on the force."

Several photographers moved forward and strobelights began flashing. Sam Niles, more used to dealing with the press, smiled and posed confidently for the pictures. Lola Mallard and Joe Ryan held back somewhat, self-consciously. Finally the Chief moved between them and urged them up beside Niles. As he did so, one of the newspaper photographers released his shutter and got a very nice picture of all four of them.

Eighteen hundred miles away, at the Camarillo State Hospital in California, a good-looking, muscular young man in his mid-twenties

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named Ralph Cidro lay impatiently on a psychiatrist's couch while the doctor questioned him gently.

"Do you ever think about your grandfather, Ralphie?" the doctor asked.

"Sometimes," the young man admitted.

"Are you ever sorry that you killed him?"

"No," Ralphie said. He had smothered his grandfather with a pillow. "He was old and sick. He was in a lot of pain. I killed him because I loved him. I didn't want him to suffer any more."

"What about your sister?" the doctor asked. "Do you ever think of her?"

Ralphie's face clouded. "I don't let myself think of her," he said bitterly. He wished his hour with the doctor was over—he wanted to get back to the library and pick up his cat. His friend Leon who worked in the hospital library took care of the cat twice a week when Ralphie had his sessions with the doctor. Ralphie hated the sessions, but he went along with them. He knew if he didn't they'd put him back on Haloperidol and he'd be like a zombie again.

"How are you getting along in school?" the doctor asked.

"Okay," Ralphie replied, relaxing a little. The doctor's questions always became more general as the hour ran out. "I'm learning to type now," he added. "Pretty soon I'll be able to type the supply requests for Mr. Dixon."

"Do you still like working afternoons in the hospital warehouse?"

"Yeah, I like it a lot." Ralphie paused, then asked, "Doctor, do you think I could ever be a white-cap?" White-caps were patients who had been rehabilitated enough to have positions of trust and responsibility in the hospital. They wore denim caps that had been bleached white.

"Someday, perhaps," the doctor said. "It's a little soon for that right now, however. You've only been here four years." He smiled. "You've got plenty of time, Ralphie," he told him pleasantly.

When the session finally ended and the doctor excused him, Ralphie showed his pass to the guard and was let out of the Psychiatric Building to walk back across the hospital grounds to the supply warehouse where he worked. On the way, he stopped off at the Recreation Building and went to the library to get his cat.

"Where's Pretty?" he asked his friend Leon, who was sorting out-of-town newspapers at a periodicals table.

"Under F for Feline, of course," Leon replied. He was a small intense young man about Ralphie's age, confined for habitual arson

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of tenement buildings. Leon claimed he only set the fires to burn up the rats and roaches that infested the buildings. He was very sorry that his last fire had also killed six people.

Ralphie went back into the stacks and found Pretty sleeping on a shelf in the F section. She was a scraggly cat with one eye completely scarred over, which was why Ralphie had named her Pretty when she rode in on a garbage truck one day and he found her. Gently, he lifted her from the shelf and returned to the table where Leon was working.

"Ralphie, look at this here," Leon said urgently, showing him a copy of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. On the front page was a photograph of the Chief of Police and three Chicago police officers. "Ain't this the cop you told me about? The one you said ruined your sister's life?"

Ralphie took the newspaper from Leon and stared at the photograph. A deep, angry frown etched its way into his expression.

A medal? They were giving that lousy cop a *medal?*

Detective Joe Ryan guided his car into a space on the visitors' lot at the Cook County Drug Rehabilitation Center. As he walked toward the entrance, he passed two fellow narcotics officers coming out.

"Hey, Ryan, I thought this was your day off," one of them said.

"It is," Joe replied, and kept walking. He knew without looking back that the two men were staring after him curiously.

Inside, he stopped at the visitors' desk and asked for a pass to see Carol Polk. The desk guard, who knew him, said, "That's the go-go dancer you busted in that big raid last week, isn't it?"

"Yeah. There are a couple of questions I have to ask her."

The guard grunted. "You're not kidding me, Ryan. You just want to get a look at her in a hospital gown. You're a sex fiend."

"That's what your wife always says. Fill out the pass before I arrest you for impersonating a guard."

When he got the pass, Joe rode the elevator to the third floor and went through a wide door marked DETOX. He gave his pass to a duty nurse and was directed to Carol Polk's bed halfway down the long ward. In the bed was a pretty but pale, washed-out young woman

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with a jungle of red hair that hadn't been combed in a week. When she became aware of Ryan's presence, she looked up at him with distaste.

"You remember me?" he asked.

"I've answered all your questions," she said wearily. "I got my supply from a guy at the club where I danced. I don't know who he is, I don't know his name, I can't remember what he looked like. If you've got anything else to ask me—"

"I haven't," Joe assured her. "I was down on another case," he lied. "I just wondered how you were getting along."

"Oh, I'm getting along just fine," she said with heavy sarcasm. "Life is one big bed of roses for me, thanks to you. Now, why don't you go away and leave me alone."

Joe said, "I've been around tough people all my life. I know a hard case when I see one, and you don't fit the bill. You don't have a record of any kind. Except for your drug habit and that dive you work in, you're probably pretty decent."

"Why don't you try minding your own goddamn business?" Carol snapped. "Since when have narco cops started preaching sermons?"

Joe felt himself turn red. "Since never!" he snapped back. He was suddenly aware that both their voices had risen, and that several other patients were watching them. Embarrassed, he said, "Forget I stopped by. Sorry I bothered you."

As he turned to leave, Carol fumbled with a Hershey wrapper on her bedtable, found it empty, and with a muttered obscenity crumbled it into a ball. Hesitating at the foot of the bed, Joe saw that her eyes had become watery.

"Out of candy?" he asked quietly. He knew how important sweets were when a junkie was trying to kick a habit.

"Just get the hell out and leave me alone!" Carol screamed.

Joe stalked away.

Back downstairs, he walked briskly toward the door, muttering to himself for being such a chump and wasting a day off. Then, as he passed the hospital canteen, he abruptly stopped. He went in, calling himself names all the way. At the counter, he bought a carton of chocolate bars to be sent up to her.

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Lola Mallard, in civilian clothes instead of her jail sergeant's uniform, stood in front of a Cook County Juvenile Court judge with her niece, Jackie, who was wearing detention-home denims. The judge, a middle-aged black woman with elegantly coiffed hair, fingered through a file before her.

"Subject of this petition," she said for the record, "is seventeen years old and has been confined at the Montefiore Home for delinquents for two years. Her record shows marijuana use, petty theft, and general incorrigibility. And you, Sergeant Mallard—" the judge looked over "—are her aunt?"

"Yes, your honor," said Lola. "Her mother, my older sister, was an alcoholic and died recently from cirrhosis of the liver. Jackie's father hasn't been around in years. I thought that if the court would release her to me for this last year before she turns eighteen, it might give her a better chance of making it when she becomes an adult."

The judge concurred. "The court is most impressed," she said, "by the fact that petitioner is not only a career police officer but will soon be receiving the police department's Medal of Honor. The court can think of no more desirable environment into which a problem juvenile could be released. The petition is granted."

"Thank you, your honor." As they stepped away from the bench, Lola said, "I'll come over to the detention home and get you as soon as they process you out."

"I can hardly wait," Jackie replied sarcastically as the bailiff led her back to the lockup.

Lola stared after her, her lips parted in surprise.

Sam Niles walked into the Washington Boulevard precinct headquarters, passing several young uniformed officers on their way out. They all saluted and greeted him with a chorus of, " 'Morning, sir."

" 'Morning, boys," Sam returned their greeting. Over his shoulder, he added, "Take care today, boys." It was something he had said to his men ten thousand times over the years, something that was as much a part of him as the scrupulous fairness for which he was

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noted, as much a part of him as the knife scar on one side of his neck that he got as a rookie. *Take care today, boys.*

Inside, Sam stopped at the booking office, at the desk of a sergeant his own age with a long row of service stripes on his sleeve and a name tag over one pocket that read: OSCAR DUGGAN.

"Well, well, if it ain't the celebrity," Duggan said sardonically. "Not only is he retiring from the force in two weeks, but he's getting the department's highest decoration as well. Next thing you know there'll be a movie about him. Starring Sidney Poitier, no doubt."

"Anything I need to know about this morning, Oscar?" asked Sam, ignoring the jibe.

"Nothing, sir," reported Duggan. "Everything routine." He leaned confidentially toward the captain. "Listen, Sam, if you'll tip me to who's gonna be taking your command when you leave, I can make some very healthy bets in the squadroom and we can split a bundle. Everybody figures it'll be one of your three watch lieutenants, but nobody knows which one. We can clean up, Sam."

"Sure, sure," Sam replied. "The last time we were supposed to clean up, a horse named Blue Rookie ran out of the money at Hawthorne. Anyway, I don't *know* who my successor will be, Oscar. It's up to the promotion board."

"It's your recommendation to the board that'll count, Sam," the sergeant insisted. "Just tell me who *you* picked."

"Sorry, Oscar," said Sam, walking away, shaking his head wryly.

Outside his own office, Sam said good morning to the young policewoman who was his secretary, then said, "Get in touch with all three watch lieutenants and have them report here at two this afternoon."

He took a moment to thumb through his morning departmental mail, then a young policeman came in and said, "The car's out front for morning patrol, sir."

"Okay, let's go," he said, tossing the mail aside.

At twelve noon, classes ended in the Camarillo Hospital vocational school and Ralphie Cidro put the cover on his manual typewriter, returned the typing instruction book to the classroom shelf, picked up Pretty from the same shelf, and left the building. Walking across

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the grounds to the big dining hall, he went to the rear loading dock and left Pretty with one of the patients on the garbage detail, then went inside where Leon was waiting for him at the serving line. After taking trays and passing through the line, Ralphie led the way to one of the farthest empty tables so he could talk privately to Leon.

"I'm getting out of here," he told his friend quietly. "This afternoon."

Leon's bottom lip began to quiver. "Ralphie, don't be dumb. It ain't so bad in here. If you escape and they catch you, they'll send you to Vacaville. That's a real prison."

"I've got to do it," Ralphie told him. "Ever since you showed me that newspaper picture, I've started having nightmares about my sister again. I wake up in a cold sweat thinking about her. I've got to stop the nightmares, Leon."

"Maybe the doctors can help you," Leon said hopefully.

Ralphie shook his head. "These doctors don't help you. All they do is find reasons to keep you here, so's they'll have jobs. Anyway, it's not just the nightmares, Leon. It's that medal. I can't let them give that lousy cop a medal." He put a hand on Leon's arm. "Will you look after Pretty for me?"

Leon swallowed tightly. "Sure I will, Ralphie."

"Thanks." Ralphie smiled. "She'll like living in the library—it's warmer than the warehouse."

That settled, he started eating.

Joe Ryan was checking the court calendar on the bulletin board in Narcotics Division when another detective said, "Captain Keeler wants you, Joe."

Crossing the squadroom, Joe knocked once on the captain's door and stuck his head inside. "You want me, Captain?"

"Come in, Joe. You make anybody on the Macklin case yet?"

"No, sir," Joe said, shrugging. "I'd have told you if I had."

Keeler, a fire hydrant of a man with wiry salt-and-pepper hair, nodded. "A couple of the boys saw you out at drug rehab yesterday on your day off. I thought maybe something came up."

"No, sir," said Joe, "not yet."

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"What were you doing down at drug rehab, then?"

"It was personal, Captain."

Keeler gave him a skeptical look. "Oh? Does it involve your job or the department in any way?"

"No, sir, I don't think so."

"I wouldn't *think* if I were you, Joe. I'd *know*," Keeler said flatly. "I'd make absolutely sure of it. Get my meaning, Joe?"

"Yes, sir."

Joe's stomach was churning when he left Keeler's office. At his desk he found some antacid tablets in a drawer and chewed a couple of them. He had to get Carol Polk out of his mind.

He had to.

Lola Mallard was showing Jackie around her apartment and trying to establish some kind of dialogue with the girl.

"You'll have to sleep on the couch temporarily, but we'll go apartment hunting this weekend and find a bigger place so you can have your own bedroom. We'll have to get you some new clothes, too, and register you in high school."

"Why are you putting yourself out like this, Lola?" the girl said. "Have you got a guilty conscience because you never helped my mother?"

"Your mother," Lola replied quietly, "would never allow herself to be helped. She was too stubborn. She never took anybody's advice, never followed anybody's example. Your mother thought she knew it all. I hope you've got better sense."

"I'm not as messed up as my mother was, that's for sure," Jackie declared. "But I don't need anyone running my life, either," she added pointedly.

Lola studied the girl for a moment. Slim, chestnut-haired, a nice face, she could, Lola thought, be very pretty if she got rid of the hard edge she had about her. It was that same hard edge, Lola remembered, that had done Jackie's mother in.

"Look, I don't want to run your life," Lola said patiently. "I just want to help you get a handle on things so you can make a good life for yourself and not end up wasting all the years you have ahead

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of you. You know, Sandy, if we work together—I'm sorry, I mean Jackie—if we work together—"

"Who's Sandy?" Jackie interrupted.

"No one you know. The point I'm trying to make is that this can be good for both of us, if we work at it. We're really all the family there is now. Won't you try? Please."

"Sure; I'll give it a shot," Jackie agreed, shrugging indifferently. "Just don't put a leash on me, okay? I'm a big girl and I need some slack."

Lola sighed quietly.

As Sam Niles was making the rounds on his morning patrol, he said to his driver, "Swing over to Fulton Street and let's see how the work is coming along."

Turning off the boulevard, Sam's driver drove to one of the side streets in the precinct and parked across from a row of three-story buildings that were undergoing renovation. Inside and out could be seen men and women cleaning, repairing, painting. Sam got out of the car and took a cigar from his inside pocket. Lighting it, he stood smoking, staring at the row of buildings, remembering.

It had been a month ago when he had sped up to these same tenement buildings to find them barricaded and surrounded by SWAT officers. "What's the situation?" he had asked a SWAT lieutenant tensely.

"These three buildings have been condemned and are due for demolition, Captain. A group of evicted tenants have taken over the premises and rigged cans of gasoline in each of the buildings. They say they'll blow them up unless they can talk to the Mayor. He and the Chief are on their way here now."

A battalion fire captain came up to them. "Hello, Sam. My men just finished a survey of the area. All of the buildings are very old, as you know. And they're close together. If that gasoline is detonated, the explosion would probably take out the whole block."

"What's your status?" Sam asked the SWAT officer.

"We're ready to take them down anytime, Captain, but we can't guarantee that some of that gas won't go up."

Sam stacked priorities in his mind, then said to the SWAT officer,

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"Hold your positions." And to the fire captain, "Have your men evacuate the rest of the block as quickly but as quietly as possible." To his own watch lieutenant, he said, "Wait here for the Chief and the Mayor. I'm going in there to evaluate the situation."

Stepping out where he could be seen by the tenants, Sam raised his hands and shouted, "Let's have a talk! I'm unarmed!" Moving cautiously, he walked up the front steps and into one of the buildings.

Cans of gasoline were lined up in the first-floor hall—the fumes were very heavy in the air.

Upstairs, Sam found a mixed lot of people—blacks, browns, whites, young, old—all of them obviously threadbare poor. "I'm Captain Niles," he said. "I'm in charge of this police precinct."

"Where's the Mayor?" a young Latino wearing a sweatband demanded.

"On the way. You people know that you're trespassing, I guess. And endangering other lives as well as your own."

"The city endangered our lives first, when it put us out into the street," a haggard-looking white woman said.

"We want to see the Mayor!" a glaring black man in a frayed coat insisted.

"That's right," said an older man wearing eyeglasses repaired with adhesive tape. "We want the Mayor to find us someplace to live. If he don't, we're gonna blow up the buildings."

"All right," Sam placated. "Just stay calm and don't do anything rash. The Mayor will be here any minute."

He got back outside to the police line just as a car arrived with the Mayor and the Chief of Police. As television cameras recorded the scene, Sam got in the car with them and reported the tenants' demands.

"Can they blow the buildings?" the Chief asked.

"I think so." Sam looked at the Mayor. "Is there any way you can help them with someplace to live, Mr. Mayor?"

"Absolutely not," the Mayor said. "See those TV cameras out there? The whole city will know about this as soon as the Six O'Clock News comes on. We give in on this one and we'll have three more just like it within a week. Go back in and tell them no deal, Captain."

Back inside facing the desperate tenants again, Sam tried to reason with them. "Ignite that gasoline and you'll be deliberately killing yourselves. Suicide is never the answer to anything."

"Maybe it's the answer to being homeless," the old man with the

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taped eyeglasses said. "When you're dead, they *have* to make a place for you—even if it's in the cemetery."

"Go back out and tell the Mayor we blow the gas in fifteen minutes!" said the glaring black man.

As he was leaving the building a second time, Sam brushed against a door hanging on a rotted doorframe. It came off and fell to the floor. He stared at it for a moment as the spark of an idea combusted in his mind. Then he hurried back to the Mayor's car.

"Mr. Mayor, there still may be a way to save this situation, sir. Those people inside aren't criminals, they're just ordinary folks in a tight spot. Look, instead of tearing the buildings down, why can't the city give them to the tenants on the condition that they renovate them? Money for repairs can come out of the same urban renewal fund that would have paid for the buildings' demolition and clearing of the debris. Labor will be provided by the tenants. And the city can establish a procedure to allow people in the future to apply for ownership of condemned buildings on the same terms, without the threat of an armed confrontation."

After some tense hesitation, the Mayor agreed to the idea. Sam hurried back inside and presented the plan to the tenants. There was some discussion, then they, too, gave approval. A few minutes later, Sam led the tenants from the buildings as firemen filed in to remove the gasoline.

"Hey, Captain Niles!" a voice called, interrupting Sam's reminiscence. Looking over, he saw the old man with the taped eyeglasses coming out of one of the buildings carrying a can of paint.

"Hello!" Sam called back.

The old man came over to him. "I read where they're gonna give you a medal for what you done here," he said. "You deserve it."

"It's you people who deserve the medal," Sam replied, bobbing his chin at the beehive of work activity going on. "You're the heroes, not me."

In the state hospital's huge stores warehouse, Ralphie pushed an oil mop along the floor outside the office of Mr. Dixon, the warehouse superintendent. Mr. Dixon was at his desk signing supply-request forms for a white-cap who stood with a clipboard waiting for them.

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Through the open office door, Ralphie heard the superintendent say, "Okay, Phil, that should do it for this week. Truck here yet?"

"Yessir, it's at the dock."

"See you when you get back then," Mr. Dixon said.

The white-cap came out of the office and started down the long aisle leading to the loading dock. Ralphie was twenty feet ahead of him, still pushing the oil mop. Presently Phil caught up with Ralphie.

"How's it going, Ralphie?" he asked.

Without replying, but with a quick glance behind to make certain no one else was in the aisle, Ralphie stood the oil mop against a row of cartons and grabbed Phil from behind. One hand over Phil's mouth, the other arm around his neck, he dragged the white-cap behind a stack of fifty-pound sacks of beans and tightened his chokehold until he felt him go limp.

Pausing only a moment to assure himself that Phil was still breathing, Ralphie quickly took his white cap and clipboard. Back in the aisle, he hid the oil mop behind the cartons, then walked briskly out to the loading dock. A truck was waiting there, a California state seal on its door.

"Where's Phil?" the driver asked.

"He got sick. Mr. Dixon took him over to the dispensary. I'm taking his place today." Ralphie held up the clipboard. "Here's the signed orders."

"Okay, let's go," the driver said.

At the hospital's service gate, the guard on duty gave Ralphie and his white cap only a cursory glance before waving the truck through.

At the narcotics rehabilitation center, Joe Ryan finished interviewing an addict arrested in the act of buying drugs. "That's it, Mr. Dunlap," he said, putting away his notebook. "Thanks for your cooperation."

"Will I go to jail, do you think?" the man asked. He was middle-aged, balding, nervous.

"No, you won't go to jail," Joe assured him. "The only people we're interested in sending to jail are those who sell the stuff. You'll be released from here in a week or so, as soon as your bloodstream is

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free of narcotics and they've built you up a little with vitamin shots. After that, it's up to you." He patted Dunlap on the shoulder. "Good luck."

Walking down the hall to leave, Joe noticed Carol Polk sitting in the solarium in her robe, reading a magazine and munching a Hershey bar. He went on by and pressed the elevator button. When the elevator door opened, Joe did not get on. Instead, he walked back to the solarium.

"Hi," he said, standing next to Carol's chair. She looked up.

"Hi." Her expression became contrite. Reaching in her robe pocket, she pulled out another Hershey. "Want a candy bar?"

"Sure," Joe said.

He smiled at her and she smiled back.

When Jackie woke up on the couch in Lola Mallard's apartment, she found a note propped up on the coffee table: "Jackie, juice in fridge, cereal in pantry. I'll be home at four and we'll go shopping for your new clothes. Love, Aunt Lola."

Jackie tossed the note aside and walked into the kitchen in the pajamas Lola had loaned her. From the refrigerator she took a Coke and drank it as she prowled the apartment. In the bedroom, she randomly opened drawers, fingering and examining Lola's personal things: lingerie, costume jewelry, cosmetics. A box of pistol cartridges made Jackie shudder. In the living room, at a small writing desk, she looked through a few bills, a household-budget notebook, and a savings-account statement. Then she saw an envelope with Lola's name typed on it, marked *Personal.* She opened it without hesitation. Unfolding the papers inside, she saw that it was a Chicago police department memorandum headed RECOMMENDATION FOR MEDAL OF HONOR. Sitting down at the desk, Jackie began to read.

Sgt. Lola Mallard, assigned to the city Jail Detail, had been in charge of the day shift on D-Tier in the female custody unit. At an appointed time, she instructed her subordinate custody officers to unlock D-Tier for the purpose of allowing the inmates housed on that tier to take showers. D-Tier was then unlocked and Sgt. Mallard announced over the loudspeaker that inmates could proceed to the

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shower room at the end of the tier. Female inmates in various stages of undress filed along the catwalk into the shower room and the shower spigots were turned on from Sgt. Mallard's control cage.

During the course of the shower period, Sgt. Mallard and her staff heard a scream from the shower room and presently a white female inmate ran naked from the room, bleeding from a five-inch cut on one forearm. Chasing this inmate along the catwalk was a naked black female inmate brandishing a single-edge razor blade and threatening to kill the white inmate, who was awaiting trial for the murder of her own children. The black inmate, herself a parent, was loudly declaring that anyone who would harm her own children did not deserve to live.

A Code Three emergency was immediately put into effect and all cell and tier doors closed and locked. Sgt. Mallard's staff drew firearms to deter the inmate wielding the razor blade, but Sgt. Mallard ordered her officers to secure their weapons. Sgt. Mallard, who knew the black inmate from two previous incarcerations, then proceeded alone and without a weapon onto the catwalk and began to reason with the inmate.

Sgt. Mallard advised the inmate that she had been facing only six months in county jail for shoplifting, but that after cutting the other inmate she would probably be sentenced to an additional year for assault. That added up to a year and a half away from her own children. Sgt. Mallard pointed out that if she proceeded to kill the other inmate, she could go to prison for life and her children would grow up without her. When the inmate with the razor blade threatened to cut Sgt. Mallard, too, Sgt. Mallard told her to go ahead and do it if she thought it was worth losing her children over.

After several minutes of tense and very dangerous negotiation and reasoning, Sgt. Mallard convinced the inmate to surrender the razor blade, thus terminating a potentially fatal incident.

After reading the memorandum, Jackie put it back in the envelope and returned it to the desk drawer. Taking a swallow of Coke, she muttered to herself, "Great. I'm in the custody of an aunt who thinks she's Wonder Woman."

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At the Washington Boulevard precinct headquarters, the three watch lieutenants arrived for their two o'clock meeting with Sam Niles. They took chairs facing the captain's desk after pouring themselves a coffee from a hotplate Sam kept in the corner. Sam poured one for himself and sat down at the desk.

"Boys," he said, "the Chief called me at home last night to tell me that on the basis of my written evaluation, the Civil Service promotion board has given each of you the maximum fifty points."

The three lieutenants exchanged surprised glances before looking back at him. It was exactly the reaction Sam had expected.

"That's right," he confirmed, "you all got exactly the same score. I have to be frank and tell you I expected it. My final evaluation to the board was that all three of you were equally qualified to fill this job and run the Washington Boulevard precinct. Qualified in different ways, to be sure—but I believe that each of you, on your own merits, would make a fine precinct commander."

He looked at Lou Dawson. Lou was the youngest of the three. Smartly dressed, personable, businesslike, he belonged to the new breed of law enforcement. "Lou, with your degrees in police science and criminology, and your conviction that police work is a profession and not just a job, you're an all-around outstanding officer."

Sam's gaze moved to the next lieutenant, Walt Downey, a black man. "Walt, you're without a doubt the most dedicated and conscientious policeman I've ever met. Your loyalty to the department and your belief in what we do are the most genuine feelings, I believe, of any man who ever carried a badge. You are truly a cop's cop."

The captain smiled at Chester Wilts. "Chet, you and I came up through the ranks together. I've never seen an officer who detests crime and its consequences the way you do. You're a tough, old-fashioned cop with the kind of values that can only be developed on the street. At the same time, you're sensitive and you're fair."

Sitting back in his chair, Sam unwrapped a cigar. He lighted it and blew a cloud of grey smoke toward the ceiling. "I could leave this precinct in the hands of any one of you and walk away without a single worry because I'd know it was in capable hands. That's why I recommended all three of you equally. And that's why, when the promotion announcement is made, it'll be the board's choice, not mine."

"When will the announcement be made?" Lou Dawson asked.

"At my retirement banquet, the night before the Medal of Honor ceremony."

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When they were halfway to Burbank, where the warehouse was located, Ralphie said to the driver, "Sir, could we pull over at the next gas station? I need to use the men's room."

"Okay," the driver said, glancing at his watch. " 'Bout time for a cup of coffee, anyway."

They pulled off the highway at a big truck stop in Calabasas. The driver went into the men's room with Ralphie. Another customer was just coming out. Ralphie's eyes swept the place, finding it empty.

"Looks like somebody lost some money," he said, pointing.

The driver turned to look and Ralphie hit him solidly on the jaw with a hard right fist. The driver slumped against the wall, clutching at a paper-towel dispenser. Ralphie hit him again, then a third time, and the driver lost consciousness and hit the floor. Quickly dragging him into one of the stalls, Ralphie took his coat, wallet, and keys, then sat him leaning sideways on the toilet and closed the stall door when he left.

Back outside, he stopped at a soft-drink machine and looked around as he bought a Dr. Pepper. Satisfied that no one was paying any attention to him, he walked casually back to the truck.

A moment later, he was back on the highway.

Joe Ryan and Carol Polk went into the rehab-center cafeteria. Each got a slice of pie and a carton of milk at the serving line. After they sat down, Carol began to eat with zest. Joe grinned at her. "Maybe you should have gotten two slices."

"I'm hungry all the time," she admitted between bites. "It's worse than the coke habit was."

"Not quite," he said. "You'll never get arrested for buying food."

She studied him. "I can't figure you, Ryan."

Joe shrugged. "Nothing to figure. What you see is what there is. Just a guy who likes a girl and is trying to show it."

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"Not just a guy," she corrected. "A cop. And the girl is a coke head."

"*Was* a coke head," Joe said.

"That remains to be seen." Then she asked, "Do people really get straight in here?"

"Sure," Joe declared. "I know a lot of people who've kicked their habits for good in here. This place has the most dedicated doctors and nurses, and the best outpatient follow-up program."

"You sound like a television commercial." Carol tilted her head. "I heard one of the nurses say you're a hero, that you're going to get some kind of medal. What'd you do?"

"Nothing much," Joe said, a little embarrassed. "Let me get you some more pie."

As he started to get up, Carol put a hand on his arm and stopped him. "I don't want any more pie. Tell me what you did to win the medal."

Joe sat back down and leaned forward with his arms on the table. "I was on a drug stakeout about six months ago—down in the tenderloin around Ashland Avenue. My partner and I were in a doorway watching a trashcan we knew was being used as a drop. After we'd been there about an hour, this young Puerto Rican woman came up to the can, put a bundle inside it, and hurried away. The bundle looked too big to be drugs, but there was something about the way she did it—she was nervous and she moved funny, like she was very weak, or on something. I decided to follow her while my partner stayed there to watch for a possible pickup of whatever she put in the can.

"I followed her a couple of blocks to a tenement building on Hubbard Street. A couple of times along the way, I thought she was going to drop right on the street—she was really shaky. But she made it to a first-floor-rear apartment and went inside. There was nobody in the back hall, so I listened outside the door. I heard this guy inside telling her to clean up some kind of mess. The woman kept saying she couldn't, she was too tired, she had to rest.

"After they argued for a couple of minutes, I heard the guy start slapping her around, beating her up, and she started yelling. That was enough probable cause for me to enter the apartment, so I knocked once and identified myself, then kicked the door open. I restrained the guy and got cuffs on him. Then I saw the mess he had been telling her to clean up: it was afterbirth. I recognized it

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because I delivered two babies when I was a rookie. The woman started crying, 'He made me do it, he made me do it—'

"When I realized what had happened, I ran outside and back toward the trashcan. There was a car stopped for a red light at the corner, so I ordered the driver out and borrowed it. I ran the light, sideswiped another car, and ricocheted off a lamppost before I reached the trashcan. But sure enough, when I retrieved the bundle, it was a newborn infant, just a few hours old. I got back in the car, put the baby on the front seat beside me, and drove to St. Elizabeth's Hospital." Joe leaned back in the chair and half shrugged. "That was it." He grinned. "It cost the city a bundle for the damage to the two cars and the streetlight."

"Did the baby live?"

"Yeah. A little girl. A nice young Puerto Rican couple adopted her. I stopped by to see her a few weeks ago. She's fat and happy, just like a baby ought to be."

"What a wonderful thing you did," Carol said quietly.

Joe fixed his eyes on her. "It's a lot easier to do the right thing than most people think." After a beat, he added, "You can do the right thing about your drug habit, if you want to."

"And if I don't want to?" she asked.

"If you don't want to, then there's not much chance for you. You'll probably end up like that baby's mother. But you don't want that."

"You could be wrong," Carol said.

Joe shook his head. "Not about you. About you, I'm right."

Carol stared curiously at him. "You're a funny one," she said thoughtfully.

Lola came out of her bedroom in uniform, ready to go to work. At the couch, she gently shook Jackie awake.

"How about doing some grocery shopping for us today?" she suggested. "It'll get you out of this apartment for a little while. I left a list and some money on the kitchen table."

"Okay, yeah, when I get up," Jackie mumbled, rolling over to face the wall.

Lola's expression tightened. "We're going to get you back in school

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next week, too, young lady," she said crisply. "You can't just lie around sleeping and watching television the rest of your life."

"Sure, sure," Jackie said into her pillow.

Shaking her head, Lola left the apartment. On the way to her car, she muttered to herself, "Why did I let myself in for this?"

Jackie slept until nearly noon, then got up and had leftover pizza and a Coke for breakfast. Seeing the grocery list and money on the table, she rolled her eyes toward the ceiling in exasperation. But after eating, and wanting a cigarette, she got dressed and walked over to Lawrence Avenue to a Royal Blue market. For twenty minutes, containing her boredom, she pushed a cart around and collected the items on Lola's list. At the checkout counter, she said, "A pack of Carlton's, too."

"Got any I.D.?" the cashier asked.

"Look, give me a break, will you?" Jackie asked wearily. "It's not like I'm trying to buy vodka."

"Vodka or cigarettes, I still have to have I.D.," the cashier insisted.

"Hey, I'm eighteen, okay?"

"Sure you are. And I'm Meryl Streep. The reason you don't recognize me is I'm made up for a movie role." Her expression firmed. "No I.D., no cigarettes—period."

Muttering angrily, Jackie paid for the groceries and started home with them. Walking through the apartment complex toward Lola's building, she passed a row of carports. In one of them, a shirtless young man with a tattooed snake on one forearm was working on a motorcycle. There was an open can of Bud and a pack of Marlboros next to him on the ground where he sat. Jackie paused and pondered for a moment, then went over to him.

"Hi. Could you spare a cigarette?"

The young man quickly appraised her and bobbed his chin at the pack. "Help yourself." He watched as Jackie bent over to get a cigarette. Fishing a Zippo from his jeans, he lighted the cigarette for her. "Live in the complex?" he asked.

"Kind of," she said, exhaling. "I'm staying with my aunt. I've got a feeling it's going to be just temporary, though."

"What's your name?"

"Jackie."

"Mine's Neal." He smiled. "You like bikes, Jackie?"

She shrugged. "I've never been on one."

"No kidding? I'll give you a ride later if you want."

Jackie shrugged again. "Okay. Maybe."

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Neal nodded toward the rear of the carport where he had a portable icechest. "Grab a beer for yourself."

Why not? Jackie thought. She sauntered into the carport.

Sam Niles guided his personal car, a conservative late-model Chevrolet, along Lake Shore Drive and turned into the underground garage of a luxury highrise apartment building. Parking in one of the visitor spaces, he rode the visitor elevator up to the lobby and stopped at the reception desk.

"I'm Mr. Smith. Mr. Scanlan is expecting me."

"Yes, he is, Mr. Smith," the reception-desk attendant said politely. He pressed one of several buttons on his console. "Elevator four, sir."

Sam stepped into elevator four, the door closed without a sound, and the car rose without Sam doing a thing, non-stop to the thirty-second-floor penthouse. A Filipino houseman was waiting for him when the door opened again.

"Good day, Mr. Smith. Mr. Scanlan is in his studio. This way, please."

Sam followed the houseman through an elegantly furnished apartment into a large room with a wall of glass that took in the north light. It was a room cluttered with easels and canvases, oils and acrylics, pastels and watercolors, landscapes, seascapes, sketches. Near the window at an easel, palette in one hand, brush in the other, stood a tall lean man about Sam's age, wearing expensive casual clothes, his hair styled, fingernails manicured, freshly shaved face lotioned. Despite it all, he looked more like a longshoreman than a Lake Shore Drive resident, and he had the bullethole eyes of a street thug.

"Sam, come in," he greeted.

"Hello, Nick." Sam walked over and looked at the canvas. His face registered surprise. "That's the old neighborhood," he said. "Corner of Lake Street and Paulina."

"You recognize it," Nick said, pleased.

"You're becoming very good, Nick," said Sam. "I'm impressed."

Putting the palette and brush aside, Scanlan wiped his hands on a towel and smiled. "Pity I didn't discover my talent while I was still young enough to do something about it." He took Sam's arm. "Let's

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have a final drink together, my friend, even if it is the middle of the day."

Scanlan led Sam into a richly furnished study and poured each of them a brandy in leaded-crystal snifters. Sitting in large, comfortable chairs before the room's dry fireplace, Scanlan opened the drawer of an end table and handed Sam a thick envelope.

"You'll find a nice bonus in there, Sam. A token of my respect for you. Tell me, how does it feel to be retiring?"

"A little strange," Sam admitted.

"Any regrets?" Scanlan asked. "As far as you and I are concerned, I mean?"

"No," Sam said, "I don't think so."

"I'm glad," Scanlan told him. "There's no reason for you to have." Holding up his fingers, he began ticking off imaginary items. "Your precinct has less narcotics traffic, fewer robberies and burglaries, and fewer crimes of violence against the person than any precinct in the city of Chicago. Sure, it has more vice and more gambling—that's how I make a living, on women and cards and dice—but it's *controlled* vice and *controlled* gambling. And it leaves your policemen free to devote time to the precinct's serious problems. We have nothing to be ashamed of, Sam, either of us."

His palm cupping the snifter, warming the brandy, Sam asked, "What will you do now, Nick? After I'm gone, how will you operate?"

"The same way I always have," Scanlan replied matter-of-factly. "Your successor and I already have an arrangement."

Sam's lips parted incredulously. "You mean you know who's getting my job? I don't even know that myself."

Nick smiled. It was an odd smile that didn't brighten his expression at all. "I picked your successor three months ago, Sam, when you put in your retirement papers. There are five people on the Civil Service promotion board. Three of them belong to me."

"Who is it?"

Scanlan shook his head. "Your reaction when the announcement is made at your retirement party wouldn't be genuine if you knew beforehand."

Sam shook his head, mainly in surprise that anything Nick Scanlan did could still surprise him. The two men talked a bit longer, mostly about the old neighborhood where they had met more than forty-five years earlier, and then they drank their brandy toast, shook hands for the last time, and Sam left.

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Riding back downstairs in the silent elevator, Sam couldn't help frowning as he thought of his three lieutenants.

Lou Dawson: young, handsome, college-educated. A climber.

Walt Downey: black like Sam, loyal, dedicated, true-blue to the force. An operator.

Chet Wilts: an old-timer, street-tough, a hardcore cop. A survivor.

Which one, Sam wondered, had Nick Scanlan gotten to?

Ralphie stood outside a May Company department store in the Plaza Mall shopping center in Pasadena. Under his arm he held the clipboard from the hospital warehouse. The list of supplies had been left on the front seat of the truck when he parked it an hour earlier on the rear lot of the county courthouse.

Ralphie was waiting for a particular type of young man to come out of the mall. Someone approximately his own age, but not so large that Ralphie couldn't handle him. Ralphie was big, and strong from hefting around cartons of canned goods and sacks of beans. He wasn't afraid to confront anyone his own size, but he didn't want to take any unnecessary chances now that he was out. Getting to Chicago was the important thing. Getting that cop.

As he waited, a little old lady emerged from the store with several packages in her arms. She paused to fumble in her purse for car keys and Ralphie noticed an open wallet of currency in the purse.

"Let me give you a hand there, ma'am," he said, stepping forward and relieving her of the parcels.

"Why, thank you, young man. How kind."

Ralphie carried the packages as she led the way to her car. When they got there, she unlocked the door and he put the packages on the back seat for her.

"You certainly are a nice young man," she praised. "Here, let me give you a dollar."

"No, ma'am," Ralphie declined. "I'm glad to help. Uh, ma'am, you better keep your purse closed or you'll lose your wallet."

After the woman drove away, Ralphie returned to the May Company and loitered some more. Within five minutes, he saw a young man about his own age, in a suit, come out carrying a paper bag and head for the parking lot. Glancing around to be sure that no

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one was paying any attention to him, Ralphie took the clipboard from under his arm and hurried over to intercept the young man at his car.

"Excuse me, sir, I work for the mall parking-lot maintenance office. Did you know you've got a real serious leak in your fuel line?"

"I have?" The young man looked dumbfounded.

"Yessir. Look here underneath the trunk—it's running all the way back."

The young man crouched down to check. When he did, Ralphie, after another quick glance around, raised one foot and drove his head against the bumper. The young man dropped to the asphalt, out cold. Taking his keys, Ralphie opened the trunk and quickly hoisted him into it.

On the grounds of the rehab center, Joe and Carol walked along one of the narrow sidewalks until they came to a bench that wasn't occupied. They sat down and leaned back, the sun warming them. Carol was looking much better now. There was color in her face, her hair was nicely combed, and she was dressed in her own slacks and sweater.

As they sat there, Carol looked tentatively at Joe several times before she finally worked up enough nerve to say what was on her mind.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Joe," she said.

"I know all I have to know."

"No, you don't," she insisted. "If we're getting serious about each other—and it looks like we are—I want you to know everything up front. I don't want you being surprised later on."

Joe looked away. He hated moments like this. Moments when the dirty past came forward to soil the clean present. But he knew he wouldn't be able to discourage her—she had been working up to it for several visits.

"If it'll make you feel better," he said, "go ahead."

Taking a deep breath, Carol began. "I came to Chicago from a little town in Indiana. Like a lot of other girls, I had big ideas. I dreamed of becoming a newspaper reporter, or getting into broadcasting, or becoming a secretary to a handsome entrepreneur and

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having him fall in love with me and marrying him. I thought all you had to do in the big city was circulate and sooner or later the right things would happen to you. It never occurred to me that I was just one of a steady stream of young girls arriving every week, all looking for the same right things to happen. And all finding out that the wrong things usually came along first.

"I had a few so-called glamor jobs: I worked for a newspaper, then for a radio station, and a publicity agency, a photographer's studio. None of them paid a living wage—I always had to have a part-time job to make ends meet. I was an usherette at one of the downtown theaters, a perfume demonstrator at a department store, a cocktail waitress. I even tried selling encyclopedias."

She gazed off across the hospital grounds, her expression darkening. Other patients walked by but she appeared not to see them. Joe sat looking at the sidewalk, letting her purge the bad memories.

"Pretty soon the grind began to wear me down," she continued. "I got fed up with being overworked and underpaid, with trying to compete with girls who were prettier and had better clothes and seemed to be better liked, with coming home alone to a seedy little room. Finally, when the hundredth guy offered me a hit off a joint he was smoking, I figured what the hell, why not? I started smoking grass and hanging out. Gradually I tried pills, even a little hash, and before long I was on coke. I never developed a big habit, but it was steady—it was enough of a habit that I couldn't support it working in an office. That's when I started dancing topless.

"That place where you busted me, the Twilight Club, was where I'd made a few coke buys, so they kind of knew me. Sometimes I'd hang out in there and have a few drinks. When I complained of always being short of money, they offered me the dancing job. Fifteen minutes every hour, in a bikini bottom and high heels, up on a stage behind the bar. I learned that if you danced real close to the guys at the bar, they'd stick dollar bills in the elastic of the bikini bottom. Most of the time, with what the club paid me and the tips I got, I was able to keep up my habit with no problem. But once in a while, when business dropped off, I couldn't make ends meet—" Carol lowered her eyes and her voice "—so I turned a few tricks—"

Joe reached out and put a finger on her lips. "That's enough," he told her in a gentle voice. "I've heard the story before. The important thing isn't what's happened to you in the past, it's what you make happen in the future."

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Carol seized his hand and gripped it desperately. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to handle the future, Joe."

He smiled and with his free hand brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead. "What if you have some help from a friendly cop?"

"Why, Joe?" she asked plaintively. "Why do you want to help me?"

Joe's smile disappeared and his face became serious. "I thought you'd have figured that out by now."

His hand went behind her neck and he pulled her lips to his.

When Lola entered the apartment, she found Jackie and the biker drinking beer and playing acid rock on her stereo.

"What the hell?" she said incredulously. Her eyes swept knowingly over Neal: the rolled-up T-shirt sleeves, the dirty jeans, the tattoo. "Get on your feet!" she ordered. "Get out some I.D.—quick!" Neal, looking at Lola's uniform, was just as surprised as she was. As he reached for his wallet, Lola shouted at Jackie, "Turn off that music!" She snatched the driver's license Neal held out, her eyes sweeping over its data.

"Twenty-three!" she stormed. "This girl is seventeen!"

"Hey, lady, how was I to know?" Neal protested. "She said she was nineteen."

Lola glared at Jackie and gave the license back to Neal.

"Get the hell out of here!" she told him. "And stay away from this girl!"

Neal almost stumbled over his own feet getting out of the apartment. As soon as the door closed behind him, Jackie became indignant. "I'm not allowed to invite friends in, is that it?"

"Friends!" Lola seethed. "You call gutter trash like that a friend? For God's sake, Jackie, he wasn't even clean—he *smelled* bad!"

Jackie picked up an open can of beer and took a swallow. "Look, *Aunt* Lola," she said defiantly, "if you want me to live like a nun, you'll have to put me in a convent. Otherwise I intend to get a little fun out of life."

Taking the can of beer with her, she went into the bathroom and slammed the door. Lola sat down and stared at an ashtray full of cigarette butts. After a moment, she shook her head in utter frustration.

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Sam pulled into the driveway of his home, a modest, middle-class residence in a mixed North Side neighborhood. Getting out of the car, he went over to a hedge his white neighbor was trimming between their yards. "I thought it was my turn to do the hedge, Mac."

"I'm doing it for you," Mac said. "It's your retirement present."

"That's nice of you, Mac." Sam smiled. "Want to mow my lawn, too?"

"Are you kidding? I figured you'd start doing mine since you're going to have so much free time. Hey, you want to watch the game at my house Sunday? You bring the beer?"

"It's a date." Sam looked at his watch. "Got to go—bowling night."

Sam's wife Della met him as he came through the door. "The kids not here yet," he said, more a statement than a question since their car wasn't in the drive.

"No, but Yvette called," Della said. "They're on the way. Don't worry, you won't be late."

"Maybe I wouldn't mind being late," Sam said, looking at her full but shapely body in shorts and a polo shirt. He pulled her close and nibbled at her earlobe. "How much time have we got?"

"Not enough for you," she teased. "Ten years ago, maybe." Sam started to protest, but Della, looking over his shoulder out the window, said, "Anyway, here come the kids now."

Their son Jesse came through the front door, followed by his attractive young wife Yvette and the only Niles grandchild, Zach, who ran immediately to his grandfather. Jesse, in the uniform of a police sergeant, had a hanger of civilian clothes over one shoulder.

"I've got to change here, Dad—I didn't have time before I had to pick up hotshot and his mother."

"Snap it up, then," Sam said. "I don't want to be late for my last night in the league."

Fifteen minutes later, driving to the bowling alley, Sam asked, "How's the boy doing in school?"

"Great," Jesse said. "That private academy is quite a place. I just wish the tuition wasn't costing you so much."

"Don't be worrying about that. It's worth it to me. Especially if I finally get to see somebody in this family become a doctor or—"

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"Dad, don't start," Jesse said tolerantly. "I'm happy being a cop."

"You could have done a lot better," Sam declared.

"Better than you?" Jesse asked pointedly. "You've got a big house in Acapulco, a Bentley in the garage down there, a boat—"

"I don't want those things discussed," Sam reminded his son. "Anyway, they didn't come from a cop's pay. I've been very lucky with investments."

"Sure you have, Dad."

Sam shot his son a curious glance.

Near the south end of the Las Vegas Strip, Ralphie filled out a registration form to check into a Holiday Inn.

"Could I have a room around back?" he asked. "I'm a light sleeper. And what time tomorrow do I have to be out?"

"Checkout time is noon," the desk clerk said.

Driving around to the rear, Ralphie backed the car into the space in front of his room door and parked. It was twilight, shadows deepening everywhere. After opening the door to the room, and making sure he wasn't being observed, Ralphie lifted the car's owner from the trunk and dragged him inside. The young man's wrists and ankles were now bound with adhesive tape, and another strip covered his mouth. Ralphie had done that in a parking lot in Barstow, California, on the highway to Las Vegas. In Baker, California, he'd stolen the front license plates from two different cars and put them on the car he was driving, in case it and its owner had been reported missing by then.

From the motel-room bed, the bound and gagged man looked up at Ralphie with terrified eyes.

"Relax," Ralphie said easily, "I'm not gonna hurt you." Sitting the man up, he peeled the tape from his mouth and held a glass of water to his lips. When the man finished drinking, Ralphie tore off a new length of tape and gagged him again. Then he sat him on a chair and tied him there with strips torn from one of the bedsheets. He swiveled the television around and turned it on for the man to watch. "I'm going out to get us something to eat," he said. "Don't try anything funny while I'm gone. I don't want to hurt you—but I will if

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I have to. All I want is your car and a few hours' head start. Just cooperate and you'll be all right."

On his way out, Ralphie unplugged the telephone cord and took it with him. He hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.

Joe walked down the hall of the rehab center carrying a potted plant and a box of chocolates. He whistled a little tune that was barely audible except to himself. It had been a long time since he had felt so good, so relaxed. He was seeing Carol every day now, for at least an hour—longer when he could juggle his schedule. And soon, when she was discharged, he planned for them to be together every night.

When Joe reached the entrance to the ward, he saw that Carol already had a visitor. Sitting next to her bed, smiling and talking, was a handsome man with wavy black hair, wearing stylishly mod clothes. Stepping back from the double doors, Joe watched through the glass until the man finally rose, bent to kiss Carol briefly on the lips, and left.

In the hallway, the visitor went directly to the men's room. After hesitating for a minute, Joe followed him. Inside, Joe found the man at one of the sinks, washing his hands. Putting the plant and candy on a shelf, Joe stepped to another sink and did the same. He studied the man more closely: thick healthy hair, gold chain around his neck, designer sport shirt, crocodile loafers.

Presently the man dried his hands and left. Joe looked at himself in the mirror and was suddenly struck by the contrast he presented. His own hair was ordinary brown—and thinning. The suit he wore was plain grey, off the rack. His posture, he realized, wasn't even good.

Angrily, he gathered up the plant and candy and went into the ward. He put them on Carol's bedtable and asked, "Who was the guy that just left?"

"Just a fellow from the club where I was dancing," Carol replied lightly. "What a pretty plant—what kind is it?"

"Never mind the plant," Joe said. "I saw the guy kiss you. Is he your boy friend or something?"

"No, of course not, Joe. We've gone out a couple of times, but—"

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"He looks like he's got money. He wouldn't be a dealer, by any chance, would he?"

Carol's expression hardened. "Are you visiting me as a cop today, Joe?" she asked coldly.

Jackie came awake to the sound of soft moans coming from her aunt's bedroom. Getting up, she turned on a small lamp and went to Lola's door to listen. As she stood there, the moans became more intense and presently were interjected with pleas of, "No—no! Sandy, no!"

"Lola, are you all right?" Jackie asked through the closed door. She waited, listening, but there was no reply. Quietly she opened the door. "Lola?"

In the light from the hall, Jackie could see Lola tossing fitfully in a restless sleep. As her head turned from side to side, she continued to repeat the same odd plea: "No, Sandy, no—"

Jackie touched her aunt's shoulder and Lola jolted awake. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"You were calling out in your sleep," Jackie said.

Shaking her head, Lola sat up, pulled a tissue from a bedside box, and blotted perspiration from her face. "I guess I must have been having a bad dream," she said.

"Who's Sandy?" Jackie asked.

"Just—someone I used to know," Lola replied vaguely. "Go on back to bed, Jackie. I'm sorry I woke you."

Shrugging, Jackie left the room. When she was gone, Lola lay back down and stared into the dark. She tried to blink back tears but could not.

At the bowling alley, after the league games were over, Sam and Jesse sat changing into their street shoes as some of the bowlers stopped to shake hands with Sam.

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"Gonna miss you, Sam," one commented.

"Yeah," another said. "This kid will never be the bowler you are."

A third asked, "Do they have bowling alleys where you're retiring in Mexico?"

The captain of the team looked sternly at Jesse. "Try to get in a few lines of practice before next week, will you?"

A few minutes later, as Sam and Jesse left the bowling alley and walked toward a nearby cocktail lounge, Jesse shook his head skeptically. "I don't think these guys are real thrilled about me taking your place on the team, Dad."

"They're just ragging you," Sam assured him. "They'll let up on you as soon as I'm gone."

In a booth in the lounge, when they had their drinks, Sam asked, "How's everything at home?"

"Pretty good," Jesse said. "We're working at it. I think we'll make it."

"I hope so," said Sam. "Yvette is a fine young woman, we don't want to lose her."

"No," Jesse agreed quietly, "we don't." He toyed with his glass for a moment, then said, "Cassie comes up for parole soon."

"I know," Sam nodded. His eyes narrowed a fraction. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No," Jesse said, but he averted his eyes as he said it. Then he asked, "Will it be a problem for you, Dad?"

"If it is," Sam said confidently, "I'll find a way to handle it."

In the Las Vegas motel room, Ralphie finished feeding his captive and put a new strip of adhesive tape over his mouth. And this time he used another length of torn bedsheet to blindfold him. Releasing him from the chair, he guided him to the bed and let him lie down.

"Try to go to sleep or something," Ralphie told him calmly. "In a few hours this will be over and you'll be free to go. You haven't given me no trouble and I promise not to hurt you."

In the bathroom, Ralphie stripped to the waist and opened a paper bag from a nearby drugstore. Removing a hair-coloring kit, he carefully read the instructions. When he was sure he understood what to do, he ran a sink of hot water and began.

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Several hours later, he studied himself in the mirror. His hair was now a dirty blond and changed his appearance considerably. Pleased with the results, he dressed again. From his shirt pocket, he took the photo from the Chicago newspaper. They were all in a row, the four cops: Sam Niles, Lola Mallard, Joe Ryan, and the Chief. I hope you enjoy the next few days, Ralphie thought, his eyes locking onto one of the faces. They're the last days of your life.

Going to the bed, Ralphie saw that his captive actually was sleeping. Ralphie smiled. He had laced the young man's coffee with an over-the-counter antihistamine, snapping open the capsules and sprinkling their contents into the coffee he gave him with the hamburger and fries. He was pleased with himself. Living in the hospital all that time had taught him a lot. Then for just a moment he felt sad, remembering the hospital. He wondered how Leon and Pretty were doing. Maybe, he thought, after he killed the lousy cop he'd go back and turn himself in.

Putting a blanket over his captive so he wouldn't catch cold, Ralphie slipped quietly out the door, hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside knob again, and got into the car.

It was just after midnight when he drove out of Las Vegas, heading toward Utah.

Joe parked his car on Wabash and walked over to Rush Street. The Twilight Club was in the middle of a block of similar small go-go and strip joints, all of them pretty much the same except for their names. They were places that catered to morning drinkers, sexual frustrates, and drug users who were one step up from street-corner buys. In the early-afternoon light, they all looked like old whores; only at night, in shadows, did they give the appearance of warmth and comfort.

Joe paused just inside the door to let his eyes adjust to the cavelike light. As he expected, the club was uncrowded at this time of day. A topless dancer was on the postage-stamp stage, performing listlessly to the taped music. When he could distinguish faces, Joe scanned the few occupied tables and booths. He found who he was looking for—the handsome guy who had visited Carol the previous

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day—in a booth with two women who looked like they might also be club dancers.

At the bar, Joe opened his badge case and asked, "Who's the sharpie in the second booth?"

"Name's Frankie Dupas," the bartender said.

"Tell him I want to talk to him," Joe said. "At the other end of the bar where it's private."

Joe walked the length of the bar and waited, not sitting, as the bartender crossed the room to deliver his message. Presently Frankie Dupas left the booth and came over to where Joe stood.

"You want to see me?" he asked.

"You were out at the drug rehab center yesterday visiting Carol Polk," Joe said.

Dupas shrugged. "So?"

"What's your interest in her?"

"My interest in Carol?" Dupas frowned momentarily, then his expression brightened. "Oh, you're *that* cop. Yeah. Carol mentioned you." His expression became amused. "Let me ask you the same question: what's your interest?"

"I want to help her," Joe said simply.

"That's very nice," Dupas said in mock compliment. "Keep on bringing her candy, why don't you?"

"I think you know what I mean."

"Okay, so why come to me, man?" Dupas asked impatiently.

"I'd like to get your cooperation," Joe told him. "I want to try to keep Carol completely away from the drug environment. I want to keep her away from places like this, people like you."

"People like me? Hey, you got a hell of a nerve, even for a cop. I mean, this is a grown woman we're talking about. I'll stay away from Carol when *she* asks me to."

"Look," Joe tried to reason, "she's not going to have a lot of will power and self-confidence when she first gets out of rehab. It'll be tough on her to stay straight. All I'm trying to do is keep temptation out of her face."

"Oh, sure," Dupas sneered. "Keep temptation out of her face while you get into her pants. You're not fooling anybody, man."

Joe worked to control his rising anger. "I'd really appreciate it if you'd go along with me on this, Dupas."

"Get lost, man." Dupas started to walk away.

"Just a minute—" Joe took hold of his arm to stop him, but Dupas jerked away.

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"Keep your hands off me!"

"Have it your own way," Joe said. "Put both hands on the bar and spread your legs."

"What?" Dupas asked incredulously.

"You heard me." Joe grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him sideways. Dupas tried to pull away. That was exactly what Joe hoped he would do. Taking a half step back, he plowed his right fist into Dupas' stomach well below the belt. Dupas doubled over, groaning. While he was in that position, Joe hit him twice more. Dupas dropped to his knees. Moving around behind him, Joe pulled his arms back and handcuffed his wrists together. Then he dragged him to his feet and began going through his pockets.

He found a dozen cellophane packets of cocaine. "Mr. Dupas," he said, "you are under arrest for possession of an illegal substance. You have the right to remain silent—"

Bored, Jackie strolled over to the carport where she had first seen Neal working on his bike. The motorcycle was there but not Neal. Going up a flight of outside stairs to a row of kitchenettes above the carports, Jackie found a door with NEAL SNYDER on a sticker next to the doorbell. She rang the bell.

Neal, shirtless, a can of beer in his hand, opened the door. When he saw who it was, his eyes rolled upward. "Just what I need: jailbait with a cop for an aunt."

"Can I come in for a few minutes?" Jackie asked. "I need somebody to rap with, you know?"

"You trying to get me busted, kid?"

"Come on, Neal," she pleaded. "Just for a little while. I'm going loopy in that apartment with nobody to talk to. Please."

Neal let her in and Jackie flopped down on his worn sofa. There was a joint burning in an ashtray on the table and she took a hit. Help yourself," Neal said sarcastically. He saw how she had sprawled out and his eyes flicked up and down the length of her. You want a beer, too?" he asked.

"Sure," Jackie said. "Anything to lighten me up."

Neal went to the counter in the alcove kitchen and pulled the tab on another can of beer. Taking a quick swallow of it himself, he then

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filled the can back up from a bottle of vodka he had handy. Returning to the couch, he gave the can to Jackie and sat down beside her. They talked, drank a little, finished the joint, and lighted up another one.

"Wow, strong beer," Jackie said after a couple of swallows.

"Are you lightening up?" Neal asked, putting a hand on her leg.

"A little," Jackie admitted. "But not that much." She moved his hand away. "Look, I just came over for some company."

"I know what you came over for," Neal said with a leer.

Jackie set the beer aside. Lola had been right, this guy *did* smell bad. "I forgot, I have an errand to run," she said. "I'd better get going—" She started for the door.

Neal blocked the way. "Wait a minute, what the hell's the drill here?" he asked indignantly. "You come in here, smoke my grass, drink my booze, then tell me you gotta go run an errand? You and me got some business first, honey."

"You'd better let me out of here, Neal." Jackie was suddenly very afraid.

"I'll let you out of here when I'm through with you."

Jackie tried to push past him and Neal shoved her back. She hit him, the palm of her hand cracking hard against his cheek. Infuriated, he punched her in the face with his fist. Blood gushed from her nose. He drew back, shocked by the sight of it. "You bastard!" Jackie yelled.

Darting past him, she jerked open the door and ran out.

Neal didn't even consider following her. Instead, he pulled a duffel bag from the closet and started stuffing his belongings into it. He didn't want to be around when the little tease's aunt came looking for him.

Sam was at his desk when Chet Wilts, the watch lieutenant, came in and handed him a form letter and a mug shot of a pretty young white woman.

"Letter from the parole board," he said. "Cassie Butler's due for a hearing next month. They're asking whether we have any reason to oppose her release. I know that precinct policy is to oppose parole

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on all drug dealers, but I thought you might want to make an exception in her case."

Sam nodded for the lieutenant to sit. Good old Chet, he thought. Never misses anything. "How much do you know about her and my son Jesse?" he asked.

"Just the bare essentials," Wilts said. "A friend of mine in Narcotics, cop named Joe Ryan, told me he'd seen Jesse with her a couple of times. So I knew they were involved—I didn't know how serious it was. Later, Ryan told me the woman was a user: they had her on film buying coke at City College during the big sting operation that was set up there. I was just about to pass the information on to you when the bust came down at the college. It was in our precinct, we provided backup. When it was over, I know Jesse spent an hour in your office and came out sweating. So I figured you knew. Was I wrong?"

Sam smiled. "I can't remember the last time you were wrong on a judgment call, Chet." He drummed his fingers silently on the arm of his chair. "Jesse was having some problems at home—the kind most cops have sooner or later: too many hours on the job, too much time in the gutter, being too close to the scum. I talked him into signing up for the department's law-enforcement-degree program—that way he'd not only get ahead on the job, but two days a week he'd have decent hours in class and get home on time.

"Unfortunately, the good intentions of a father don't always work out. Cassie Butler was a teacher at City College. She and Jesse met and became romantically involved—and for him things got even worse at home. Eventually, Jesse's wife filed for divorce and asked for custody of Zach. That got Jesse's attention. He tried to break up with Cassie, but she wouldn't have it. She was crazy about him, wanted him to let his wife go through with the divorce so she and Jesse could get married. It was about that time that Jesse discovered Cassie was using coke. Of course, he knew about the planned sting operation—all the officers in the law-enforcement-degree program had been briefed on it as a courtesy. It's obvious that he didn't warn Cassie about it, because she got caught in the net."

Wilts pursed his lips in thought for a moment. "Joe Ryan told me she was just a user—one of several teachers who made regular buys at the college. But she was sent up for *dealing*."

Sam nodded. "When the arresting officers searched her desk, they found a large enough quantity of coke for the D.A.'s office to charge her with being a dealer. She denied it from the very beginning,

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denied it all the way through her trial—claimed she had no idea how that much coke got in her desk."

Wilts stared at the captain. He and Sam Niles had been friends for more than thirty years. He had never been anything less than honest and candid with Sam, and he was not going to pull any punches now. "You think Jesse planted the stuff?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know, Chet," Sam replied wearily. "I honestly don't know. And I haven't had the guts to ask him. Maybe I'm afraid of what his answer would be. What I do know is that Cassie Butler thinks *I* did it. Her lawyer told me so after her trial. She thinks I did it to get her off Jesse's back. She somehow found out that my officers worked backup in the sting and that I was Jesse's father. So she put two and two together and came up with five."

"You think she might want to get even if she makes parole?" Wilts asked.

"Who knows?" said Sam.

In Pueblo, Colorado, Ralphie, wearing new clothes, leaned forward at a department-store counter and signed a charge slip. The sales-clerk, a young man about Ralphie's age, handed him his copy without checking the signature. "Thank you very much," he said. "Have a nice day."

"You, too," Ralphie replied, picking up his parcel of new shirts, jeans, underwear, and socks. Walking toward the exit, he glanced at the watch he had taken from the man he'd left in the motel room. It was just after noon the following day. By now, Ralphie figured, a maid had probably ignored the DO NOT DISTURB sign and entered the room, discovering the bound and gagged man. A stolen-car bulletin would be going out across the Western states sometime that afternoon. But that didn't bother Ralphie. He had abandoned the man's car in Moab, Utah, early that morning and stolen another from a motel parking lot. Now, in new clothes, with a fresh car waiting at the curb outside, he would be heading for Kansas.

Then Missouri.

Then Illinois.

Then Chicago. And the cop.

As he crossed the street to where he had parked the car, he heard

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a burst of raucous jeering coming from a doorway down the block. Looking, he saw a poolroom where a group of punks in their mid-teens were loitering about. A young girl of twelve or thirteen, carrying schoolbooks, was being harassed by them as she tried to walk past on the sidewalk. They blocked her path and were generally rousting her, in a harmless but irritating way. But as Ralphie watched, the bullying got out of hand and the girl spilled her books to the sidewalk and stumbled to one knee.

Tossing his package into the car, Ralphie walked over. Two of the punks were trying to help the girl up, but she was crying and resisting them. Ralphie grabbed one by the throat and pushed the other boy hard, sending him flailing backward. Squeezing the throat of the first one until the boy was choking and coughing, Ralphie then shoved him away and flicked his eyes in a quick appraisal of the others. They immediately backed off.

Helping the tearful girl to her feet, Ralphie picked up her books and said, "Come on with me. I'll take care of you."

Two days after arresting Frankie Dupas, Ryan was summoned to Captain Keeler's office again. There was another officer with Keeler.

"Joe, this is Lieutenant Trumbull of Internal Affairs. We've got a problem with the Dupas bust."

"What kind of problem?" Joe asked.

"Dupas' attorney," said Lieutenant Trumbull, "has a sworn statement from his client to the effect that you beat him up and arrested him for personal reasons. He said those reasons have to do with a woman named Carol Polk, a junkie you've been seeing."

"She's not a junkie any more," Joe interjected. "She gets out of rehab this week. She's clean now."

Captain Keeler looked at him incredulously. "You've actually been socializing with a junkie?"

"I've been trying to help her."

"Your job is not to *help* criminals, Ryan," the IA man snapped, "your job is to arrest them."

"She's not exactly a criminal, Lieutenant."

"If she broke the law, she is!"

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Joe looked at Keeler. "Am I being charged with something here, Captain?"

"Joe," the captain said evenly, "this guy Dupas' attorney is drawing up a million-dollar lawsuit against the department for violating his client's civil rights. He's going to hold a press conference this afternoon and demand that you be suspended pending an investigation."

"It was a righteous bust," Joe insisted. "Dupas had coke on him with a street value of five or six thousand dollars. He was dealing."

"What was your reasonable cause for searching him?" Trumbull asked.

"He was under the influence of an illegal substance in a public place. His urine test at the jail hospital will back me up on that."

"That's all you had?" Trumbull pressed. "Under the influence in a public place?"

"That's all I needed," Joe replied coldly. "Then he resisted me."

Captain Keeler and the IA lieutenant exchanged quick glances. Joe was right and they both knew it. To suspend him would make the department look very bad. But the matter of Carol Polk would have to be looked into.

"Joe, the department doesn't want to do anything on this before the medal ceremony," Keeler said. "IA will have to open a file on it, but they won't schedule you for a formal interview until after the ceremony. You've got some days off coming—I want you to take them. Stay out of sight until the ceremony. Don't talk to the press about this. Stay away from the department—and stay away from this Polk woman. That's an order, Joe. Understand?"

Joe's lips tightened. "Yes, sir."

"That's all for now," said the captain.

When Lola first entered the apartment, she thought Jackie was just napping on the couch. But as she started to walk by, she saw the ugly blue swelling on her left cheek and the dried blood crusting her nostrils.

"Good God—"

Lola knelt at once to examine her. Jackie, who had a wet towel

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in one hand, raised up on her elbow and tried a sick half smile. "I—guess I should have listened to you."

"Here, give me that," Lola said, taking the towel. "You need ice." She hurried to the kitchen, wrapped a dozen ice cubes in the towel, and brought it back. "Was it that biker?"

Jackie nodded as Lola gently put the ice on her face. "My fault. I went to see him."

"All right, never mind," Lola said. "I'm going to feel your nose and see if it's broken. Hold still." She touched the bone on the bridge of Jackie's nose and the girl drew in a quick breath of pain. "Okay, okay," Lola quickly comforted her. "I think it's all right." She went to the kitchen again and came back with a bowl of warm soapy water and a washcloth. "Let's get the dried blood off."

As Lola ministered to her, Jackie blinked back tears. "You're gonna be mad at me for this, aren't you?"

"No, honey, I'm not," Lola assured her. "I can't be mad at you when you're hurt. I love you, Jackie. I've loved you since you were a little baby. From the day you were born, I wished you were mine." Her eyes softened. "I've always wanted a little baby to raise."

Jackie's expression became curious. "Why haven't you ever married and had kids of your own?"

Lola paused and looked frankly at her. "Don't you know why?"

Embarrassed, Jackie shrugged. "I can remember a couple of times hearing Mom say something about you and—other women."

"Well, it's true," Lola admitted. "I like love and sex that's very gentle. I've only been able to find that with another woman."

Jackie said self-consciously, "You don't seem like you're that—different."

"I'm not, really," Lola replied. "Except for my choice of lovers, I'm just like anyone else. For instance, I love you like any aunt loves a niece, I'm sure. That part of me isn't different."

"You really do?" Jackie asked, her lower lip trembling as tears came. "You really do love me?"

"Of course I do, honey." Lola gathered the girl into her arms as Jackie began sobbing. "There, there," she said softly, rocking Jackie back and forth as if she were a little child.

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Sam entered a smartly furnished Loop office through a door lettered: LAMAR GANS, ATTORNEY AT LAW. An attractive receptionist rose at once and said, "Come right in, Mr. Niles. Mr. Gans is expecting you."

Entering a private office, Sam was met by a young white man about Jesse's age who shook hands and then gave him a brief hug around the shoulders. They exchanged pleasantries as the receptionist brought them coffee before leaving them in private. Then Sam asked, "Get everything taken care of for me?"

"Yes, I did," Gans replied, unlocking a bottom desk drawer and removing a file folder. Opening it, he went down a list of items on a yellow legal pad. "You and Della have first-class seats on the morning American Airlines flight to Acapulco three days after the medal ceremony. I've called down there to alert the servants. Also, your car is being serviced and the boat taken out of drydock."

Gans moved his finger down the page. "I've started the gradual distribution of property, as you requested. The two motels in Rosemont have been put in Jesse's name through his power-of-attorney. The Des Plaines apartment buildings are in a trust for Zach. The income from both the motels and the apartment buildings will go into money-market funds and be kept confidential until you advise differently."

"Good," said Sam. "Now then, I want you to transfer title to the shopping mall to yourself and Hazel."

"Sam, I can't let you do that," Gans protested. "You've done more for me already than I'll ever be able to repay. You took me out of a street gang, put me through law school at Northwestern, bought Hazel and me a house for a wedding gift—"

"You just do as I tell you," Sam said firmly. "I'm the client here."

Touched, Gans said quietly, "Okay, Sam, you're the boss."

"There's one other thing I want taken care of," Sam told him. "Cassie Butler is coming up for parole next month. I had Chet Wilts send her recommendation form back unopposed, so she'll probably make release. See to it that she gets ten thousand in cash to get her started. And offer to help her get established in another state if she wants to resume teaching." He stared into space for a moment. He hoped that the better things went for Cassie Butler when she got out, the less inclined she'd be toward thoughts of getting even.

The two men concluded several more items of business and Sam rose to leave. "Have you found out who your successor is going to be?" Gans asked.

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Grinning, Sam said, "No, but whoever it is, I know Nick Scanlan has already gotten to him. They'll announce his name at my retirement banquet. You'll be there, I hope."

"Of course." The young lawyer put an arm around Sam's shoulders again. "I wouldn't miss the retirement banquet *or* the medal ceremony. You're the closest I've ever had to a father, Sam. I'm very proud of you."

Sam's eyes grew misty and he reached for his handkerchief. "Allergies," he said gruffly.

In the stolen car in Pueblo, Ralphie glanced over at the young girl he had rescued. "Pull your skirt up," he ordered.

"What?" she asked tearfully.

"Your knee is bleeding. Blood's hard to wash out. Pull your skirt up so it won't get blood on it."

"Oh." Her expression relaxed. "Okay," she said, and drew the hem of her skirt up a couple of inches.

"Here." Ralphie pulled several tissues from a box on the dashboard. "Blot the blood away. And dry your eyes."

"Okay." She sniffed and did as he told her.

Ralphie took a tissue for himself and blew his nose. He felt like he was coming down with a cold. "Which way is it to your house?" he asked. She gave him directions.

As he drove her home, Ralphie glanced at the girl from time to time. She reminded him of his sister when they had both been kids. Not in looks, exactly—more in presence: her freshness, innocence, that kind of glow that comes with still being unspoiled. Then he thought of the newspaper clipping in his pocket, the photo of the three cops and their chief. You ruined her, he thought, one of the faces polarizing in his mind. You ruined my sister's life. And you're going to pay for it.

"That's my house there," the girl pointed, interrupting his musing. "The one with the green shutters." She gathered her books onto her lap. Ralphie pulled into the driveway. Just then a man in a police uniform came out onto the porch. "That's my daddy," the girl said.

Ralphie looked at the steering wheel and expelled a weary sigh. "I don't believe this," he muttered to himself.

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The girl's father descended the porch steps and walked toward the car.

Joe looked around the grounds of the rehab center until he located Carol sitting alone on one of the benches, looking at a newspaper. Walking over, he sat down beside her and saw the story she was reading. Its headline said:

HONOR COP CHARGED
IN FALSE ARREST

Putting the paper aside, Carol looked at him and shook her head. "How in the hell did this get started?" she asked in a strained voice.

Joe shrugged. "There's nothing so unusual about it. It's an old story. A man meets a woman, falls for her, and tries to show her he cares." He smiled grimly, as if the joke was on him. "Only in this case, nobody could believe it. Not the department, not Frankie Dupas, not even you." Looking at her, his expression was part resignation and part sadness. "I probably should have expected things to go sour. I'm not very good at—relationships."

Carol shook her head in confoundment. "Knowing all you know about me, and being what you are, how could you possibly have fallen for me?"

"It was easy," Joe replied quietly. "I just looked at you."

They sat in silence, not looking at each other, not touching, thinking their own thoughts. Finally, after a while, Carol leaned over and rested her head on Joe's shoulder.

"Lola," Jackie asked, "who's Sandy?"

Lola paused in washing the dishes. "Have I been talking about her in my sleep again?"

"Yes. Nearly every night." Jackie picked up a dish to dry. Several days had passed since the incident with Neal, but her face was still swollen and bruised.

"Sandy was a girl I once knew," Lola said, resuming her dish-

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washing. "We were together for three years. I've been dreaming about her lately. I guess having you around reminds me of when she and I were together."

"Where is she now?"

"Dead," Lola said. She fell silent, not elaborating, and Jackie had the good sense not to press her about it. They finished cleaning up the kitchen and made hot chocolate to take into the living room, where they sat to watch television after dinner. But tonight Lola didn't turn on the set. She waited until she and Jackie were settled at opposite ends of the sofa, then told her the rest of the story.

"Sandy's family came down pretty hard on her when they found out she was living with me. They hounded her about it for months, day in and day out, trying to convince her that she was sick, begging her to change and be 'normal,' pressuring her to leave me and go back home. It finally upset her so much she had to see a doctor. He put her on tranquilizers, sleeping pills, ulcer medicine, but none of that eliminated the real problem, which was the pressure from her family. They even began showing up at the bank where she worked. It got so embarrassing she had to quit."

Lola paused to take a sip of her hot chocolate. Jackie watched her with growing sympathy. The drawn expression on her face and the hollow emptiness of her eyes were clear indications to Jackie that her aunt was haunted by the memory.

"Eventually," Lola continued, "it became too much for her to handle. She got her prescriptions filled one day when I was at work and took all of them at once. Then she lay down on my side of the bed and went to sleep with her head on my pillow. She never woke up again."

Ralphie got out of the car as the girl's father approached. He was looking hard at Ralphie, in that way Ralphie had noticed policemen had. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Sir, your daughter had a little problem on her way home from school," Ralphie said.

"It was those boys from the poolroom again, Daddy," the girl interjected. She went to her father and he put an arm around her. A

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woman—the girl's mother, Ralphie supposed—hurried out of the house and put an arm around her.

"I was coming out of a store up the street when I saw they were bothering her," Ralphie explained. He was trying very hard to keep his voice under control, but adrenaline was coursing through him, preparing his body for crisis, increasing his heartbeat to combat tempo.

"What are you so nervous about?" the father asked.

"I had to hit one of them," Ralphie admitted. "I just don't want to get in no trouble for it."

The man lifted his daughter's chin and looked into her eyes. "Are you okay, honey?"

"I just skinned my knee is all," she said. She reached out and touched Ralphie's arm. "He helped me, Daddy. He won't get in trouble for hitting that boy, will he?"

Her father studied Ralphie for a long moment. "No," he finally assured her, "he won't get in trouble." Ralphie's heart began to slow down. The policeman glanced at the Utah plates on the car Ralphie was driving. "New in town?"

"Passing through, sir. On my way to Chicago to live with my sister." He forced a smile. "She's got a good job for me back there. Working in a library."

A police car came down the street just then and pulled into the driveway next to Ralphie's car. Ralphie wet his lips and tried not to look concerned. An officer in a uniform identical to the one the girl's father wore got out and came over. His eyebrows raised inquisitively. "Problem?" he asked.

"Poolroom punks again," the girl's father said. "We'll take care of it when our shift starts." He looked at Ralphie again. "I guess you'd better be on your way. It's a long drive to Chicago."

"Yessir," Ralphie said. He winked at the girl and started for his car. Before he got to it, the girl's father called to him.

"Hey—"

Tensing, Ralphie paused and looked back.

"Thanks," the man said.

Ralphie nodded and got in the car. As he backed out, the other officer noticed the Utah plates for the first time. "Hey, we just got a stolen-car report with a Utah-plate number," he said.

"That's not the car," the girl's father told him.

"I'd better check it, anyway."

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The girl's father put a hand on his arm to stop him. "I said it's not the car."

The two policemen and the woman and the girl all watched as Ralphie drove away.

At his retirement banquet, Sam sat at the head table with Della and listened as the Chief told the audience about his and Sam's days together as rookie cops.

"Sam and I have fought a lot of crime over the years," the Chief said. "We made a lot of busts and we've seen a lot of changes along the way. We're a better, stronger, more efficient department today because of those changes—and because of career officers like Sam. I don't hesitate one moment in admitting that it has been dedicated men like Sam Niles who have been responsible for my personal success. A police force is only as good as its Chief, and that Chief is only as good as his senior officers."

Glancing over at a front table where his three lieutenants and their wives sat, Sam's eyes fell on Chet Wilts. Chet had taken him aside for a moment when he and Della arrived that evening. "In my spare time," Wilts had told him quietly, "I've been doing a little digging into how that coke got planted in Cassie Butler's desk. I went down to Joliet on my day off last week and talked to a couple of the dealers who were caught in the sting at City College. One of them gave me a lead to a guy who was busted as a user but was actually a dealer. I tracked him down over on the South Side. After a little convincing, he admitted he was the one who put the coke in her desk drawer. He wasn't trying to set her up, just trying to get rid of the stuff when the sting started going down. So that's how it happened. I thought you'd like to know Jesse didn't do it."

Sam had been genuinely touched by Chet's concern and by the trouble he had taken to relieve Sam's mind about Jesse. Looking at Chet now while the Chief spoke, he felt a deep affection for him. An old street cop, he thought. As tough as they came—and as soft-hearted. In a way, Sam hoped it would be Chet who succeeded him, Chet who had been reached by Scanlan. In the few years Chet had before his own retirement, he could build up a nice little nestegg

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running the Washington Boulevard precinct the way Sam had.

"I owe Sam Niles a hell of a lot," the Chief continued his remarks, "but I don't owe him a fraction of what this community and its citizens owe him. Sam's precinct, as you other captains know, has the least narcotics traffic and the lowest rate of robbery, burglary, and rape in the entire city of Chicago."

Sam saw his other two lieutenants, Lou Dixon and Walt Downey, exchange glances—almost as if they knew *why*. Did they? he wondered. Could they? Could *anyone?* For a split instant, he felt vulnerable, at risk, naked in front of his peers. But he quickly kicked in the steel control he had developed over a lifetime and locked it in place. The panic was squelched before it got a foothold. No one knew, he told himself. No one.

"And speaking of Sam's precinct," the Chief said now, "I know that everyone, Sam included, is waiting to find out who the new commander of the Washington Boulevard precinct will be. So let me take a moment to announce a few departmental changes that will go into effect on Monday morning."

The Chief looked down at the table where Sam's three lieutenants sat. "Lieutenant Lou Dixon is promoted to captain, and will take over our newly expanded computerized-records department at downtown headquarters. Lieutenant Walt Downey is also promoted to captain, and will be the new head of Internal Affairs."

Sam's eyes returned to Chet Wilts. With the slightest of smiles, he nodded knowingly. So it *was* Chet. "Lieutenant Chet Wilts," the Chief continued, "is promoted to captain, and will head the new PTF, Police Task Force—an elite SWAT Team group."

A deep frown crossed Sam's face. None of them had been named to succeed him. If not one of his own lieutenants, then who? His eyes darted around the room, searching for possible candidates. Presently they settled on a smiling face at another of the front tables. His lips parted incredulously.

"Finally," the Chief said, "promoted to lieutenant, with an interim rank of acting captain, and the Washington Boulevard precinct's new commander—Sergeant Jesse Niles."

Sam could do nothing but stare in disbelief.

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When Carol walked out of the rehab center, discharge papers in her hand, Joe was there to meet her. They slipped their arms around each other and he took her to his car.

In the front seat they embraced and kissed, then Carol began to tremble.

"God, I'm so shaky—"

Joe held her tighter. "First day out is always the roughest," he said. "Just try to relax."

He drove to his bachelor apartment on the North Side. As soon as they got inside, Carol came into his arms again, almost desperately.

Joe stroked her hair, massaged her neck, whispered into her ear, "It's okay. You're going to be all right."

"My body is screaming for something—" Pushing back out of his embrace, Carol began to undress. "Make love to me, Joe."

"Wait," he said, taking hold of both her hands. "I want to make love to you more than anything in the world—but before I do, there's something I have to tell you." He paused, then said, "I have a wife, Carol."

"A *wife?*"

Joe led her to the sofa and sat down with her, still holding her hands. "She's in a mental institution. We got married when I was just a rookie cop. A couple of years later, we found out that she couldn't have children. That was when she confessed to me that she had been an abused child. While she was growing up, both her father and brother took advantage of her sexually. It went on for years. She knew it was wrong, but she was too terrified to tell anyone. It wasn't until her father finally died that she had the courage to resist her brother and the abuse stopped.

"When she found she couldn't have a baby, she got it into her head that it was because she had allowed the abuse as a child. She blamed herself for letting it go on as long as it did, for not having the courage to get help. I tried to tell her that it wasn't her fault, that most abused children are too frightened and humiliated to tell anyone. I tried to convince her it had nothing to do with her not being able to become a mother. I took her to an obstetrician, a gynecologist, even a psychiatrist, and they *all* told her the two things weren't related. But she wouldn't believe any of us. The thought tormented her until she finally had a breakdown and had to be committed. She's been institutionalized for six years. Her condition gets worse every year—"

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Joe's voice broke. He let go of Carol's hands and his shoulders slumped. Carol got to her knees on the couch and put her arms around his neck. Now it was she who tried to comfort him. "It's all right, Joe," she soothed.

He looked up and she kissed him, long and passionately, her fingers going up to entwine in his hair. When she finished kissing him, she began unbuttoning his shirt. "Come on," she said. "Maybe we can help each other."

A late-model Oldsmobile pulled up in front of a Days Inn motel on the outskirts of Kansas City. A slightly overweight man of forty got out of the driver's seat and Ralphie Cidro got out on the passenger side.

"Thanks for the ride, mister," Ralphie said. "I sure enjoyed hearing all about that computer-software stuff you sell."

"Good luck getting another ride," the salesman said.

"Thanks." Ralphie smiled and waved goodbye. With his bag of extra clothes under one arm, he walked next door to a convenience store and bought a can of pop. He had abandoned the second stolen car he had been driving shortly after leaving Pueblo—he hadn't liked the way the girl's father and the other cop had looked at it. The salesman had picked him up hitchhiking outside of La Junta.

In the store, Ralphie stood drinking his pop near the window, where he could watch the front of the motel. Presently he saw the salesman come out of the motel office, key in hand, and drive back to park in front of one of the rooms. After the salesman opened the room door and began to unload the trunk of his car, Ralphie left the convenience store and sauntered over to the room. The salesman had just taken a couple of sample cases inside when Ralphie got there. Setting his bag of clothes and can of pop on the front seat of the car, Ralphie stepped into the room. The salesman's back was to him and Ralphie quickly threw an armlock around his neck. Kicking the room door closed, he tightened his hold and gradually applied pressure until he felt the salesman go limp. He lowered him to the floor, then immediately began tearing one of the bedsheets into strips as he had done in Las Vegas. Several minutes later, he had the salesman bound and gagged on the bed.

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With the man's money, wallet, and keys, Ralphie left the motel room and got into the Olds. Taking a sip of the pop, he started the engine and drove off the motel lot. Back on the highway, he continued east, toward the bridge that crossed into Missouri.

When Lola came through the door of the apartment, she took one look around and her mouth dropped open in surprise. "What's going on—what happened to this place?"

Jackie smiled. "I've been cleaning. All day."

"I'll say you have!" Lola's eyes took in the waxed floor, the polished furniture, the spotless windows. "What brought this on?"

Jackie took her hand and drew her to the sofa to sit down. "I've been doing some thinking since you told me about Sandy. What happened to her, and then the way you took care of me and didn't get mad at me after the thing with Neal, it made me realize both how bad and how good a family can be. It made me realize how important it is to have someone in your life who cares. Somebody who's on your side, no matter what." Jackie looked down, unsure of herself. "I'm not sure how to say this—"

"You don't have to say it, honey." Lola took her hands. "I understand."

"No, I want to say it." The girl looked back up. "I want to stay with you. I want us to be a family. I'm going to straighten out—I'll even go to school. As soon as my face is back to normal." Her expression brightened. "Maybe someday I'll even marry some nice guy and have that little baby you always wanted, and you can help me raise it."

"Wouldn't that be something," Lola said. This was how she had hoped it would be with Jackie and her.

They embraced and cried a little and then laughed at themselves and went into the bathroom to fix their faces.

"Let's go out and celebrate," Lola suggested. "Hamburger Hamlet. Burgers, fries, shakes—the works."

When they were in Lola's car, driving to Hamburger Hamlet, Jackie said, "You never did tell me what happened to Sandy's family. Did they try to do anything to you after she killed herself?"

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"No," Lola replied. "After the funeral, they moved away. Out to California, I think."

After the retirement banquet, Sam and Jesse Niles and their wives returned to Sam's house. Sam took Jesse into the study and closed the door. "I won't stand for it, Jesse," he said coldly.

"It was good enough for you," Jesse replied, shrugging.

"I did it so you wouldn't *have* to! I had plans for you: a fine university, a medical or a law degree—"

"You can't plan other people's lives, Dad," Jesse said quietly. "Anyway, the arrangement with Nick Scanlan *works*. The figures show that it works. Except for vice, the Washington Boulevard precinct is the cleanest section of Chicago."

"I am in partnership with a criminal," Sam pleaded for his son to understand. "I've dishonored the very badge I've worn all these years. I'm not an honest man, I'm not an honorable man. If you turn out like me, Jesse, my life will have been for nothing."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I don't buy that," Jesse disagreed. "If I can keep a lid on narcotics traffic in the middle of the West Side, keep armed robberies down, burglaries down, crimes against the person down, and all it costs me are some higher stats in the vice column, then I see it as a good deal. And if I can get something for myself and my family in addition, so much the better."

"You're not going to do it, Jesse," his father declared.

"Yes, I am, Dad." Jesse locked eyes with him unflinchingly.

"I'll stop you," Sam warned. He took a deep breath to fuel his next statement. "I'll tell the Chief about Nick Scanlan and me, about the whole deal. And about your deal, too."

"I don't believe you'd do that, Dad," Jesse said.

"Watch me," Sam threatened.

In St. Louis, Ralphie parked the salesman's car in the long-term parking lot at Lambert Airport and took a shuttle downtown. He

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had something to eat and then walked around until he found a sporting-goods store.

"Help you?" a clerk asked when he went inside.

"I'd like to look at some hunting rifles," Ralphie said. "I want to get my granddad one for his birthday." Pulling out a handkerchief, he blew his nose. He was definitely catching cold.

"Deer rifle?" the clerk asked. "Or small game?"

"Deer rifle." If a rifle could kill a deer, it could kill a person.

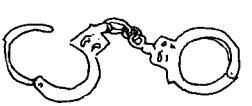
The clerk led Ralphie to a rear corner of the store and unlocked a glass display case. "How much you figuring to spend?" he asked.

"I've got four hundred dollars saved," Ralphie said. He had pooled the cash from the two men he had left tied up and the state truck driver back in California, plus his own money and the money his friend Leon had given him before he escaped. He actually had slightly more than five hundred dollars, but he held back a hundred for expenses.

The clerk reached into the display case and lifted out one of the weapons. "This one's three-eighty plus tax. It's a .30-caliber lever-action. Comes with a telescopic sight, which some older hunters like when their eyesight starts getting a little weak."

Thirty minutes later, Ralphie walked out of the store with a long box containing the rifle. He stopped at the first drugstore he came to and bought a bottle of cold medicine. At the cash register, he asked the way to the bus depot. Following the cashier's directions, he walked to the terminal, taking a swallow of the cold medicine on the way.

When he got there, he bought a one-way ticket on the next bus to Chicago. It didn't leave for two hours. To pass the time, he bought a copy of *Cat Fancier* magazine and sat in the big waiting room looking at pictures of cats. He only got about halfway through the magazine before he had to put it down. It made him too sad. He missed Pretty.



On the morning of the medal ceremony, Carol woke up to find Joe's side of the bed empty. A sudden panic seized her. She hadn't been alone since her release from rehab. Throwing back the covers, she got out of bed and hurried to the closed bedroom door. Realizing

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she was naked, she turned back, momentarily confused, then saw Joe's old robe draped on a chair and snatched it up and put it on before rushing from the room.

Joe was at the kitchen table, a portable typewriter set up in front of him. "Hi," he said, smiling, when Carol rushed in. "Did I wake you?"

She suddenly felt foolish. "No, I just wondered where you were." Belting the oversized robe around her, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"Just finished typing my resignation," he said, rolling a sheet of paper out of the machine. "I'll give it to the captain today—*after* the ceremony."

"Are you sure it's the right thing for you to do?" They had talked about it the previous night and it had seemed like a good idea at the time. But like most things, it was somehow different the next morning.

"It's the only way," Joe reassured her. "They'll never get off my back about you. It's something they just can't swallow." He stood and snapped the top back onto the typewriter. "But once I get that medal, I'll be able to get a job on any police force in the country. They won't put anything about you on my record—it would make them look bad. So I'll have a clean start. We'll go someplace new: Minneapolis, Denver, maybe even someplace warm, Arizona or Florida." He put his arms around her. "We'll start over. Lots of people do it." Carol turned around, out of his embrace, and Joe frowned. "What's the matter?"

"I'm scared," she blurted. Her hands began to tremble. "Joe, I don't know if I'm strong enough to start all over like that."

He put his arms around her again, from behind this time. "You're strong enough. And anytime you aren't, I'll be there to make you strong. We'll do it together, honey."

Letting go of her, he looked at his watch. "I'm going down to the office and quietly clean out my desk. Then I'll go on out to the academy for the medal ceremony at noon." From a drawer, he took an envelope of currency and handed it to her. "I tapped my savings account before I came to get you at rehab the other day. I want you to go shopping, buy yourself some new clothes." He winked. "Get a sexy nightgown—you can model it for me when I get home." Putting on his coat, he folded the letter of resignation and slipped it into his inside coat pocket. Then he kissed Carol and left.

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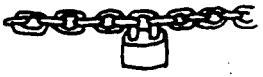
After he was gone, Carol looked at the money she was holding and her hands began to tremble again.



Near the southern city limits of Chicago, at 138th Street, in a section of preserved forest land known as the Beaubien Preserve, the Chicago police department had its training academy. Set at the edge of a small lake, it seemed a place caught between two worlds, facing in one direction a dense, undeveloped woodland and in the other a multi-lane superhighway, the Calumet Expressway. From its athletic field could be seen the woods and the lake *and* the expressway.

On the morning of the medal-awards ceremony, people on the expressway could see maintenance men preparing the field. Some were setting up neat rows of folding chairs while others rolled into place a speakers' stage on wheels. A squad of police cadets unfurled flags of the nation, state, city, and the department itself and placed them in flag mounts. Later in the morning, police-band members began arriving and uncasing their instruments.

The day was bright and clear. In the surrounding forest preserve, with its dense growth of trees, bushes, and shrubs, there was no movement, no sign of life. The woods were quiet and still—and that in itself was ominous. Ordinarily there would have been activity in the forest: squirrels, sparrows, foxes, hawks—all the wildlife would have been astir and lively. Instead they were silent and still.

An intruder was among them.

In a stand of thick bushes, at a point where the forest floor sloped upward, Ralphie was lying on his stomach, looking down at the activity on the field. His nose was runny and he dabbed at it with a handkerchief. This was the third place he had tried in his search for the best view of the stage. Now he nodded to himself, satisfied that this position would do. Rolling sideways, he stifled a sneeze,

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wiped his nose again, and unzipped a bag in which he was carrying the deer rifle.

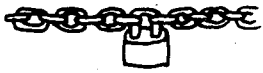
Arriving in Chicago the previous night, Ralphie had got himself a room at the Y.M.C.A. at 8th and Wabash. From a story in the evening paper, he learned where and at what time the medal ceremony would take place. At a Walgreen's drugstore, he bought more cold medicine and a city transit map. On the map he located the police academy and determined which city bus would get him there. Before he left the drugstore, he bought himself a one-quart thermos and a small canvas bag with a zipper top.

Early that morning he had disassembled the rifle and put it into the zipper bag with a box of ammunition and the thermos. Leaving the hotel, his cold now worse than before, he walked a block over to Michigan Avenue and caught a Number 54 bus. In a rear seat, he settled down, the bag on his lap, for the long ride out to the city limits.

At 134th and Prairie, Ralphie left the bus and began the one-mile walk to the edge of the Beaubien Preserve. Along the way, he stopped at a small diner, had breakfast, and got his thermos filled with coffee. Resuming his journey, he reached the edge of the wooded preserve at nine o'clock. Half an hour later he located the police-academy fence and followed it at a safe distance until he came to the athletic training field. After that, it was just a matter of finding some high ground and selecting the best position.

Lying in the bushes, Ralphie reassembled the rifle and aimed it at the stage, adjusting the telescopic sight. When the weapon was ready, he loaded eight rounds into a magazine and snapped it in place under the breech. Then, carefully, he laid the weapon aside.

He opened the thermos, took a swallow of coffee, and settled down to wait. The ground was cold and in a short time he began to sneeze and cough again.



Shortly after eleven, the athletic field began filling up as guests started arriving and took seats in the folding chairs. Small groups of people gathered near the stage. Joe Ryan arrived and came over to stand with Captain Keeler and several fellow officers from Narcotics. Conversation lulled when he walked up—everyone in Nar-

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cotics knew of his personal problem by then and felt awkward about it. But they had been ordered to attend so that their division would be adequately represented.

Sam Niles arrived with Della and found her a front-row seat before going over to join his three lieutenants and the group from the Washington Boulevard precinct. The men saw the Chief of Police and his deputy arrive, followed shortly by the Mayor and several City Council members.

When Lola and Jackie arrived, Lola introduced her niece to some co-workers from the Jail Detail. A television cameraman came over and shot some footage of the uniformed women, causing them to laugh self-consciously. Other newsmen and photographers were circulating, taking stills and shooting tape of the dignitaries and the honorees. There were so many smiles, handshakes, and pats on the back even Joe Ryan's fellow Narcotics officers began to relax.

In the bushes, Ralphie scanned the crowd through the telescopic sight, occasionally adjusting the scope's focus for a sharper view. Presently he stopped scanning and held the rifle steady on one particular group—one particular face in that group. From his shirt pocket, he took the newspaper photograph. Comparing the face in the group with the face in the photograph, his expression darkened. He wanted to pull the trigger right then, but with all the people around he didn't have a clear enough shot.

He waited, his eyes flat and cold, drumming his fingers on the rifle stock, occasionally sniffing his runny nose and suppressing a cough.

On the field, Sam saw Jesse, Yvette, and young Zach arrive and take chairs next to Della. Excusing himself, he went over to greet them. After spending a moment with his daughter-in-law and grandson, he said to Jesse, "Come with me for a minute."

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Jesse rose and followed his father to a place where they had a few feet of privacy. There Sam faced his son.

"Last chance, Jesse. Do you give me your word that you'll drop the deal with Nick Scanlan or do I go to the Chief?"

Jesse shook his head. "You may be angry, Dad, but you're not a fool."

"No, you're the fool, son, for thinking I won't do it." Turning, Sam stalked determinedly over to a group that included the Chief and the Mayor. Stepping up behind the Chief, Sam touched his elbow and said quietly, "Chief, can I have a minute?"

Just then the Mayor looked over and said, "It's noon—let's get started."

The Chief patted Sam's shoulder. "After the ceremony, Sam."

The guests were called to order and the ceremony began. It opened with the department band playing the national anthem, after which there was a brief invocation by the police chaplain. The Chief then introduced the Mayor, who rose and said a few words of praise on behalf of the city. When he finished, the Chief returned to the podium to read the individual citations. He asked the Medal of Honor awardees, who were on the stage with him, to stand during the reading. The three officers rose—Sam Niles on one side, Joe Ryan on the other, Lola Mallard between them.

The Chief began to read the first citation.

In the bushes, Ralphie carefully aimed, one eye to the scope, finger on the trigger, holding the rifle as steadily as he could in his prone position.

"You'll never ruin another girl's life," he said.

Wetting his lips, clenching his jaw against the smooth walnut stock, he slowly squeezed the trigger. But at the last split-instant before firing, he sneezed.

The shot cracked and the bullet slammed into Sam Niles, hurling him off the stage and onto the grass of the field. There were immediate shouts and screams as the sound of the shot echoed across the open space. Folding chairs were overturned as people instinctively tried to take cover. On the stage, Lola and Joe crouched with

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their guns drawn and all around the field other officers did the same. Jesse Niles and his mother rushed to the fallen Sam.

Up in the bushes of the woods, Ralphie stared incredulously down at the stage. "Missed, goddamn it!" he said aloud. Quickly he jacked another round into the chamber and re-aimed.

He squeezed off a second shot.

"Where the hell did it come from?" Joe asked tensely as his eyes swept the forest wall..

"I don't know," Lola said. She started to turn, and as she did there was another loud report and she was hit by the second shot. The bullet tore into her side and she was sent sprawling back into the double row of chairs on the stage. In the audience, Jackie screamed and ran toward the stage. Alone of all the officers on the field, Joe Ryan had seen the barrel flash of the second shot. He knew where the gunman was. As the others hurried to help Lola, Joe vaulted off the rear of the stage and ran for the tree line.

"Got the bitch," Ralphie said with satisfaction. Then he saw a man with a gun in his hand leap off the stage and run toward the wood. A jolt of panic hit him. *He had shot two people!*

Leaving the zipper bag and thermos, he scrambled from his hiding place and started running through the woods toward the busy highway. If he could reach it, he could stop a car, take it away from the driver, and escape. If I can get away they'll never know who did it, he told himself, oblivious of the fact that he'd left his fingerprints all over the abandoned thermos. Running through the woods, holding the rifle with both hands, he felt like a soldier.

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On the athletic field, Captain Keeler saw Joe running into the woods and knew instinctively that he had located the shooter. At once he took command of a group of nearby officers.

"You four men get into the woods over there and give that officer some backup!" he ordered. "You two get vehicles and take some men around to the Calumet Expressway! Block as much of the woods as you can on that side! You, get up to the communications room at the academy and send for the paramedics! Then get out an alert to seal off the whole area from 132nd down to 138th Street! Move!"

Panting, Ralphie stopped and leaned against a tree to catch his breath. Ahead of him, through the thinning trees, he could see the embankment leading up to the expressway. I'm gonna make it, he thought with a swell of elation. Then, as his heavy breathing quieted, his ears detected steady footsteps behind him.

The guy who jumped off the stage, he thought. A cop.

Cocking his head, he listened more intently. Too close, he decided. I can't outrun him, I'll have to stop him. His eyes scanned the surrounding forest. They stopped on a slight rise nearby, off to the left. Running toward it, he jacked another round into the rifle.

Above the sound of his own footsteps, Joe heard the sharp metallic click of the rifle mechanism. Instantly he stepped close to a tree and froze. There was no mistaking the sound, nothing else in the world made such a distinctive sound as a weapon being armed.

Biting his lip to control his breathing, Joe concentrated on listening. Ahead of him he briefly heard someone running—then nothing. It sounded as if the person had run to the right, but Joe couldn't be sure. Sounds in the forest were like the sounds of a cricket—you never knew exactly where they were coming from.

Cautiously, pistol at his side, his finger on the trigger, his thumb on the safety, Joe moved away from the tree and, as quietly as he could on the forest floor, walked forward and to the right.

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Ralphie saw his pursuer when he was about thirty yards away. The man had his gun drawn and was moving from tree to tree, off to the right, while Ralphie lay on the slight rise of ground to the left. Ralphie tried to sight in on him through the scope, but the man was too close and the focus was blurred, so he turned the retaining bolt, lowered the scope to the side, closed one eye, and drew a bead on the man through the fixed rear sight. Easy now, he told himself, don't mess up—

Very close to him now was the expressway embankment. A car. Escape.

Holding his breath, Ralphie waited until his pursuer was between trees. Then he squeezed off a shot.

The man fell.

On the field, ambulances arrived from both South Chicago and Roseland Community hospitals. A frantic, sobbing Jackie was restrained on the stage as Lola was given emergency lifesaving treatment and put onto a stretcher. Nearby, on the ground, Jesse was consoling his mother as the same procedures were carried out on Sam. In minutes, the two wounded officers were being sped away from the field toward hospitals.

"How does it look?" the Chief asked Captain Keeler.

"They're both still alive," Keeler replied. "That's all I know."

"We've got to get that son of a bitch, Captain!"

"We'll get him," Keeler said grimly. "I just hope he doesn't get any more of us first."

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I'm going to make it! Ralphie thought almost gleefully.

He had reached the edge of the tree line at the bottom of the embankment leading up to the expressway. All that separated the two was a cement culvert about four feet deep and six feet wide.

Leaving the trees and jogging over to the edge of the culvert, he thought about how he would stop a car. I'll just stand at the side of the highway and hold the rifle up in the air and flag traffic down. Somebody would stop, probably thinking he was a cop. Ralphie couldn't help smiling at that.

At the culvert, he laid down the rifle, dropped over the edge, retrieved the rifle, and hurried to the other side. He was just preparing to climb back out when above him two police cars pulled onto the shoulder of the expressway and stopped.

Quickly ducking low in the culvert, Ralphie ran in a crouch away from the cars. After he had gone some distance, he paused to peer up over the lip of the culvert. Four cops were standing at the top of the embankment, scanning the edge of the forest. Ralphie looked farther down the expressway in the direction he was running. Another police car was pulled over and two more policemen were looking out at the woods.

I'm trapped, Ralphie thought. I can't get up to the highway, I can't go back to the woods—they'd see me either way. He blinked back tears.

Why did I ever leave the hospital? he asked himself. What did it matter if they gave her a medal?

Up the embankment, Ralphie heard voices. He peered over the edge again. A policeman with sergeant's stripes had arrived and was sending the others down the embankment, toward the culvert.

Only one thing left to do, Ralphie thought. He rose to a kneeling position and aimed the rifle at the approaching officers.

"Hey," a voice said quietly from the opposite edge of the culvert.

Ralphie's head whirled around. It was the man who had followed him from the field—the man he thought he had shot. Ralphie swung the rifle around.

Joe Ryan shot him four times before Ralphie could pull the trigger.

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That night, in a room at South Chicago Hospital, Jackie was sitting next to Lola's bed holding her hand when Lola awoke from surgery.

"Am I okay?" Lola asked thickly through anesthetically dry lips.

"You're going to be fine," Jackie assured her, sniffing back tears.

"How bad?"

"The bullet went in, broke some ribs, collapsed a lung, and went back out," Jackie said. "The doctors promised me you'd be good as new in a few weeks."

"Do they know who did it?"

"An escaped mental patient from California. Ralph Cidro was his name. They got him—he's dead."

"God," Lola said, staring at the ceiling. "He was Sandy's brother."

It was dark when Joe got back to the apartment. Reports and paperwork on Ralph Cidro's killing had taken all afternoon. On the kitchen table he found a note from Carol: "Gone shopping," with a little heart drawn for a signature. Joe smiled at the endearment.

Very tired, he took off his coat and holster, opened a bottle of beer, and sat back in his recliner. With the remote control, he turned on the television just in time to catch part of a news report on the day's violence.

"No known motive for today's shooting," the newscaster was saying, "but it has been established that the dead suspect was a former resident of Chicago. He lived at one time with his grandfather and sister in the Humboldt Park area. Cidro and his grandfather moved to California following the suicide of the sister, Sandra Cidro. It was in California nearly five years ago that Ralph Cidro smothered to death his grandfather, who was terminally ill with cancer."

When the newscast ended, Joe set down his half finished bottle of beer and put his head back. I've got to rest my eyes for a few minutes, he thought.

When he opened his eyes again, a late movie was on. Joe snapped to alertness and looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight. Getting up, he went to the kitchen and looked at Carol's note again. *Gone shopping*. The stores closed at nine. Crumbling the note into a ball, Joe put his holster and coat back on and left the apartment.

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Twenty minutes later, he walked into the Twilight Club. The same bartender was working who had been there when Joe arrested Frankie Dupas. "I'm looking for Carol," Joe said quietly.

The bartender shrugged. "What makes you think she's here?"

Joe fixed the man in an unblinking, unyielding stare, cold and threatening. He didn't say another word, just stared. The bartender shrugged again, nervously, and swallowed. Joe's eyes remained riveted on him. Finally the bartender gave in to the intensity.

"Up the side stairs. Last room at the back of the hall."

Joe climbed the stairs and opened the door of a seedy little room. On the bed he found Frankie Dupas, clad only in his briefs, in a narcotic stupor. Next to him was Carol, in her slip, a thin trickle of blood on one arm. Joe remembered the story she had told him—a little grass, a few pills, then cocaine. Now heroin, he thought.

Carol opened her eyes and looked sleepily up at him. "Don't be mad, honey," she said slurringly, "I had to do it. You didn't come right home and I got shaky. But this is the last time, I promise. I promise—" Then she slipped back into her daze.

Joe gently touched her cheek with his fingertips and sighed. He took out his handcuffs, snapped one bracelet onto Dupas' right wrist, ran the chain behind a rung of the headboard, and put the other cuff on Carol's left wrist.

Out in the hall, Joe found a pay phone on the wall and dialed a number. After two rings, a voice answered, "Central Dispatch."

"I need a radio unit sent to the Twilight Club on Rush Street."

"What's your I.D., please?"

Joe stared at the phone without answering. To verify that the call was authentic, that he was actually a police officer, he had to give the dispatcher a number that matched his computer identification. If he didn't, the call would be ignored.

"What's your I.D., please?" the dispatcher asked again.

Hanging up the receiver, Joe leaned his forehead against the wall for a moment. From somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind came something he had been told years earlier, the day he joined the Narcotics Division. "Once a junkie, always a junkie," one of the veteran cops had said. "These people never change."

No, Joe thought now, straightening, shaking his head. No—it can't be that way. That was wrong. He was going to *prove* it was wrong.

Grimly he walked back to the seedy little room to unlock the handcuffs and take Carol home.

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At the funeral of Sam Niles, after all the mourners except those in the family pews had filed out of the chapel, Jesse walked up and stood at the open casket, looking down at his father. Sam lay in full uniform, his Medal of Honor around his neck. His expression looked remarkably alive—as if he was about to say, "Take care today, boys."

Lamar Gans came up and stood beside Jesse. The lawyer's face was drawn with grief. Studying the young white man for a moment, Jesse said, "You really loved him, didn't you?"

"Yes," Lamar replied quietly, "I did."

Jesse nodded briefly. "So did I."

Reaching into the casket, Jesse removed Sam's badge and pinned it on his own uniform. He put his badge on Sam's chest.

"Okay, Dad," he said, "you win." Turning to Lamar again, Jesse said, "Get in touch with Nick Scanlan. Tell him the deal's off. Tell him to get his operations out of my precinct."

Jesse joined his mother and wife as the pallbearers stepped forward, closed the casket, and rolled it toward the door.

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We hope you enjoyed the first double issue in the history of EQMM. The next double issue will be March 1990's great 50th Anniversary Issue. Among the plans for our golden anniversary year is a special contest, consisting of 50 questions about *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, to be spread over the first ten issues of 1991, January through October (another double issue). The winner(s) will be announced in double issue #4—March 1992!

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JANWILLEM van de WETERING (about Mr. XYZ)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Dr. Sam Hawthorne)

HARLAN ELLISON (about Jane Doe #112)

ROBERT BARNARD (the stuff of nightmares)

plus a reprint about Rumpole by JOHN MORTIMER

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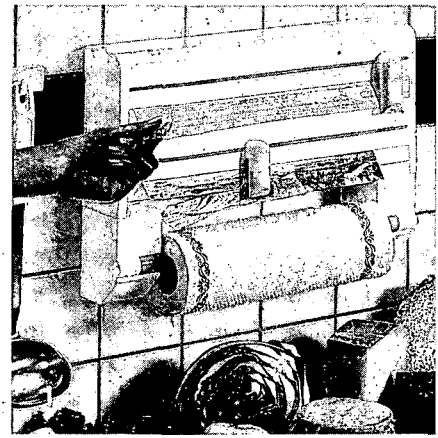
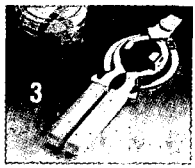
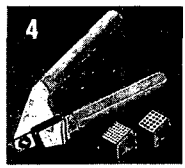
▼ PERFECT KITCHEN ROLL DISPENSER AND 3 PIECE KITCHEN TOOL KIT

Do kitchen wraps have you all thumbs? Then THE Perfect Kitchen Dispenser is for you. It's the only one that, cut after cut, holds the roll end ready to be picked up and pulled out for the next sheet. The two "neat-sheet" cutters feature stainless steel blades for cutting that's a cinch. Holds standard rolls of cling-film, aluminum foil, or wax paper plus a paper towel holder. Simple front loading procedure makes replacement a snap. Sleek white and grey design fits any decor. But there's more: it comes with state of the art hand can opener, super strong jar and bottle opener, and impressive garlic/onion press with 2 inserts for fine and coarse pressing. So get a handle on kitchen wraps and treat yourself. **$69.98** ($8.50) #A1954.



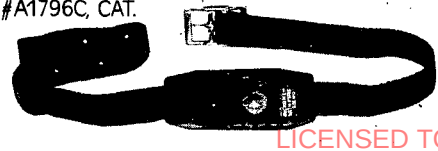


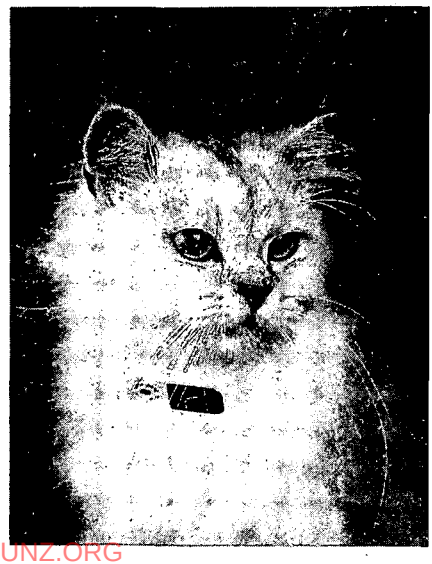


1. DISPENSER
2. HAND CAN OPENER
3. JAR AND BOTTLE OPENER
4. GARLIC/ONION PRESS

▼ DO FLEAS HAVE EARS?

The Microtech Flea Collar with its blasts of ultrasound creates such an intolerable environment that fleas and ticks abandon their pet hosts within 5 days. It is designed specifically for fleas and focuses on a 4' zone of protection; the Microtech Collar outperforms other kinds of ultrasonic pest chasers. A vast improvement over poison powders and chemical collars. Works on cats *or* dogs. Adjustable 19" collar fits 97% of dogs and runs for 6-8 months on 2 lithium cells (included). You can afford to see if it *really* works because you are fully protected by our guarantee — you have nothing to lose but the fleas! **$44.98** ($3.00) #A1796, DOG; **$44.98** ($3.00) #A1796C, CAT.





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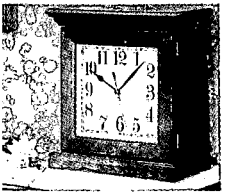
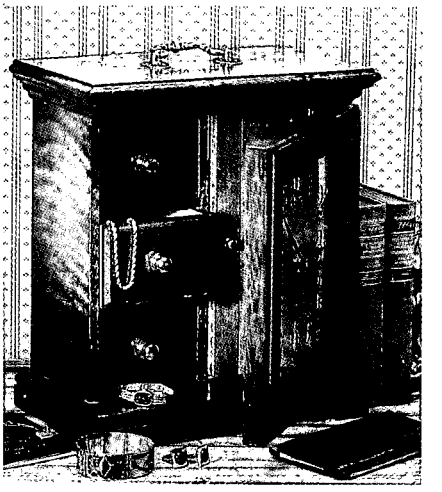
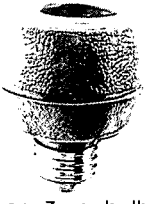
A TIMELY SECRET



Do you have valuables or other important items that need a secure and secret--hiding place? Why not store them in an elegant 17th entury reproduction of a mantelpiece lock! Handcrafted in cherry, and accented ith solid brass, the clock has large antique tyle numbers and features a quartz owered movement. This lovely accent iece measures 13" (h) x 11¾" (w) x 6½" (d) nd will grace any dresser, desk or mantel. he clock face opens to reveal 3 fabric lin- d drawers and a larger (10" x 4" x 3¾"), ompartment, complete with key. Beauty nd security in one lovely piece—what a imely idea! **$99.98** ($8.00) #A1917.

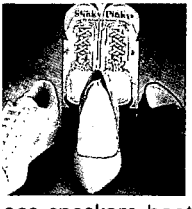


TEACH AN OLD LAMP NEW TRICKS



Any lamp that takes a standard bulb can be updated with the Touchtronic dimmer. No rewiring needed-just screw into lamp socket. Then your touch on any metal part becomes the "switch"-touch once for low light, again for medium, a third time for full wattage. Handy when you're entering a dark room, great at bedside and a real comfort to the arthritic or the ill. You'll save time, money and electricity-no ıore 3-way bulbs to buy and you pay for only as much light as you need. L listed; one-year factory warranty. **$15.98** ($4.00) #A1700. 2 for **$27.98** 6.00) #A17002.

FRESHENED FOOTWEAR



Just put a Stinky Pinky "sock" in each shoe and overnight odor is gone, absorbed by the special blend of all natural earth materials. Works in running oes, sneakers, boots, leather shoes, anying that goes on your feet. And keeps on ɔrking, too—just put Stinky Pinkys out in e sun for a day every three months or so restore their odor-catching ability. Three irs of Stinky Pinkys, enough for 6 shoes boots, costs **$19.98** ($4.00) #13263.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 110 EL; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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▽ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki; #A1957-Gray.

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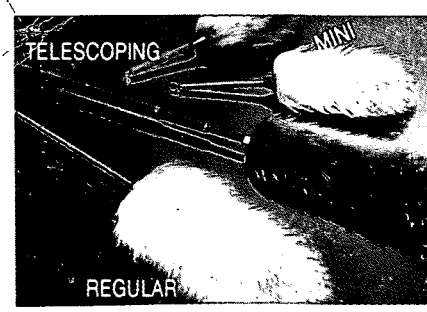
▽ LAMBSWOOL DUSTERS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet—lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters **$22.98** ($4.00) #A1870.

▽ TALKING ALARM CLOCK

Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½" x 3" x 4". **$27.98** ($4.50) #A1916.

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